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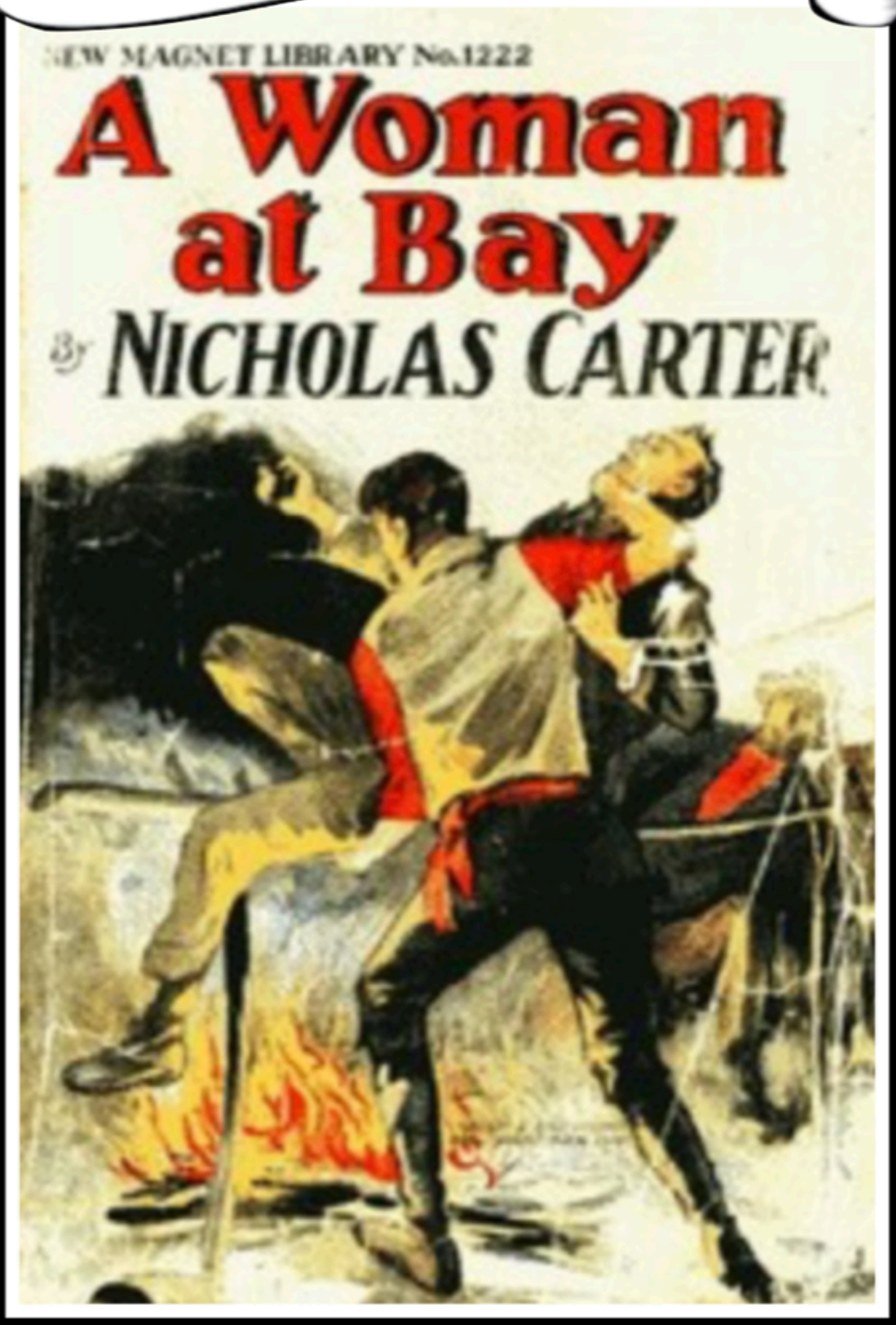

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A WOMAN AT BAY

OR

A Fiend in Skirts

BY

NICHOLAS CARTER

No. 1222

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Detective - Nick Carter

A WOMAN AT BAY.

CHAPTER I.

THE KING OF THE YEGGMEN.

Four men were seated around a camp fire made of old railroad ties, over which a kettle was boiling merrily, where it hung from an improvised crane above the blaze.

Around, on the ground, were scattered a various assortment of tin cans, some of which had been hammered more or less straight to serve for plates, and it was evident from the general appearance of things around the camp that a meal had just been disposed of, and that the four men who had consumed it were now determined to make themselves as comfortable as possible. The kettle that boiled over the fire contained nothing but water—water with which one of the four men had jocularly said he intended to bathe.

These four men were about as rough-looking specimens of humanity as can be imagined. Not one of them had been shaved in so long a time that their faces were covered with a hairy growth which suggested full beards; indeed, their faces looked as if the

only shaving they had ever received, or rather the nearest approach to a shave, had been done by a pair of scissors, cropping the hair as closely as possible.

The camp they had made was located just inside the edge of a wood through which a railway had been built, and it was down in a hollow beside a brook, so that the light of their fire was effectually screened from view, save that the glow of it shone fitfully upon the drooping leaves over their heads.

The four men were tramps—hoboes, or yeggmen, of the most pronounced types, if their appearance went for anything at all.

Their conversation was couched entirely in the slang of their order; a talk that is almost unintelligible to outsiders.

But, strangely enough, the four men were not hoboes at all; neither were they yeggmen; and the lingo they talked so glibly among themselves, although perfect in its enunciation, and in the words that were used, was entirely assumed.

For those four men were Nick Carter, the New York detective, and his three assistants, Chick, Patsy, and Ten-Ichi, a Japanese.

The president of the E. & S. W. R. R. Co. had sent for Nick Carter a week before this particular evening, and as soon as he and the detective were alone together in the president's private room, he had opened the conversation abruptly with this question:

"Carter, have you ever happened to hear of a character known as Hobo Harry, the Hobo King?"

"I have," replied the detective. "I have heard about him in a vague sort of way. I have no particular information about him, if that is what you mean."

"No; I merely wished to know if you were aware that there is such a character."

"Yes. I have heard of the fellow."

"Do you know what he is?"

"A yeggman, isn't he?"

"He is the king of all the yeggmen. He is the master mind, the controlling spirit of all the outlawry and lawlessness that goes on from one end of our big railroad system to the other. Hobo Harry costs us, in round numbers, anywhere from three to ten thousand dollars a month."

"Really?" asked the detective, smiling.

"Yes—really. This is no joke. There isn't a bit of thievery, however petty it may be, or a scheme of robbery, however grand and great, which they do not turn their hands to under the guidance of Hobo Harry—and we have about got to the end of our patience."

"I suppose," said Nick, "that all this means that you want me to find Hobo Harry for you. Is that the idea?"

"That is precisely the idea. Do you suppose you can do it?"

"I can, at least, make the effort."

"I should tell you one thing before you become too sanguine."

"Well, what is it?"

"Hobo Harry is largely a mystery. There are those—detectives, I mean—who insist that he does not exist at all, save in imagination."

Nick nodded.

"They say that he is only a figurehead; that he is only a name; that he is in reality an imperceptible, intangible idol, whom hoboes worship, and

to whom they refer as their common leader, while, in reality, there is no real leader at all."

"It is possible that they are correct in that idea," said the detective slowly.

"It is possible, but it is not likely. There is too much system about their operations. I am at the head of a great system, and I know how such things are done. I am confident that the operations of these thieves—these yeggmen—could not have been carried on so successfully, and so systematically, without a head—a chief; and so I, for one, believe thoroughly in the existence of Hobo Harry."

"Well?" asked the detective. "What does all this lead to?"

"I am coming to that. I have had every railroad detective in my employ searching for Hobo Harry for months—I might say for almost a year, and without success. I have employed two of the largest and best—so called—detective agencies in the country to assist me. The result has in every case been the same."

"What were the results?"

"There have been any number of hoboes and yeggmen arrested; many of them have been sent to prison; some of them have gone up for long terms; we have proved the cases of robberies against them often enough—but the point is, that the robberies have gone merrily on afterward, just the same."

"Go on," said the detective, nodding his head.

"Eight separate times we have had, as we supposed, Hobo Harry himself in our clutches. Each of those eight separate times the prisoner who was supposed to be Hobo Harry has confessed that he was that individual, and——"

"And so you have arrested eight Hobo Harrys, eh?"

"That is about the size of it. But the point is——"

"The point is that not one of the eight was really Hobo Harry."

"Exactly."

"Very good. Go ahead with your story."

"In each case, after the arrest, as we supposed, of Hobo Harry himself, the robberies and thefts along the line have received an impetus; they have increased in number, and in volume—and also in seriousness. These yeggmen do not confine themselves to breaking into freight cars and stations along the line of the road. They burglarize post offices, and even country banks. They pillage houses. They turn their hands and their talents to anything and everything where there is hope of reward for them. The thing has got beyond endurance."

"Well?"

"We want you, Carter, to find Hobo Harry himself—if you can."

"Well?"

"The matter was discussed thoroughly at a meeting of our board of directors yesterday, and it was determined at that meeting that if you could find Hobo Harry and arrest him, and, having arrested him, could convict him and send him to prison, and, having done that, could prove to our entire satisfaction that the man is Hobo Harry, your reward will be fifty thousand dollars, spot cash. Only, you must understand, we must be certain that your man is the real article."

"Hobo Harry, the King of the Beggars, eh?"

"Yes. Beggars, you know, is supposed to be the name of their organization."

The detective nodded.

"Will you take the case, Carter?"

"I suppose so—if there isn't a time limit set upon it."

"You may take your own time; that is, of course, if it is not too long."

"It will require some time to do the thing thoroughly."

"I suppose so. Well, have it your own way; only succeed. That is all the railroad people desire—success."

"I will get your man; only I won't promise to do it in a day, or a week, or a month. I won't set a time."

"All right. You shall be your own master in the case."

"I will have to be that—absolutely. After I leave this office, when my interview with you is finished, you will not see me again until I have got Hobo Harry in my clutches. You will not communicate with me, or attempt to do so, and I will not communicate with you."

"That is a little hard, isn't it, Carter? We would like to know, from time to time, how you are getting on, and what you are doing."

"That is precisely what you will not do."

"All right. Have it your own way. But what about the other men that are now on the case, Carter?"

"Leave them on it. Add more of them. Appear to increase your vigilance in other quarters. If there are fifty detectives on the case now, add fifty more if you wish. I would prefer that you should do so rather than not. The more the better."

"But suppose that one of them should nab the real Hobo Harry while you are seeking him. You would lose the reward."

"I will take my chances about that. The point is that I must work absolutely independent of all others who are on the case, and that

nobody outside of yourself and the board of directors of your company must know that my services have been called into the matter. Will you agree to that?"

"Certainly."

"Increase your vigilance on every side, if you can. If you do so, you will assist me."

"I suppose," said the president slowly, "that it is your plan to become a yeggman yourself, in pursuing this case."

"It does not matter how I may accomplish it, does it?"

"No; I was merely going to say that that very thing has been tried four separate times; once with more or less success. But I ought to warn you that two of the four who attempted it lost their lives; a third is a cripple for life, minus a leg; and only the fourth, who ended by arresting the wrong man, after all, had any degree of success. And now he is frightened almost into imbecility, for his life has been sworn away by the yeggmen, and he expects to be murdered every time he goes out alone."

"All the same," said the detective, "that will not deter me."

"You will want money for your expenses, Carter. If you will tell me how much——"

"I will present my bill of expenses along with my demand for the fifty thousand dollars reward," the detective interrupted quietly.

By more closely questioning the president of the railroad, Nick learned that the depredations and robberies committed by Hobo Harry's gang had been remarkable in their extent and thoroughness; and that every effort to break up the gang had been in vain.

Whenever one of the yeggmen was arrested and sent to prison, two new ones, even more proficient in their thievery, seemed ready to spring up in his place; and so the thing had gone on and on until the people who had been robbed so often became desperate.

And then it was determined to call Nick Carter into the case.

Of Hobo Harry himself, nothing whatever was known beyond the fact that there was such a character, and that he was the head and front of the hobo gang—their chief, to whom absolute and implicit obedience was accorded. His power over them seemed absolute.

Whether it was because of fear of him, or for love of him, it was, nevertheless, true that not one of the fraternity of hoboes who had been arrested could be prevailed upon to betray the master. Neither threats nor offers of bribery had any effect upon them.

Hobo Harry remained as entirely in the dark as ever; and even in the president of the railroad had referred as having confessed that each of them was Hobo Harry himself—they had each seemed to get a queer sort of enjoyment in posing, even for a time, as their dreaded chief.

As the president explained to Nick, there were many among the detectives who had been detailed upon the case who insisted that there was no such person as Hobo Harry. It was their belief that the name was merely a fictitious one, to which the hoboes, one and all, had agreed to give obedience.

But the president of the railroad did not believe this; neither did the detective. The completeness of the organization of the gang was a sufficient negative to such a statement. To have a perfect organization there must be a chief; a head; a ruling power.

By investigating the case a little further before actually starting out upon it, Nick discovered that the yeggmen had carried their depredations even

into whole villages. In one town—Calamont—the place had been literally gutted in a single night.

The yeggmen had descended upon it in such numbers that the inhabitants were terrified, and could only protect themselves by barricading their doors, and remaining with their guns and other weapons in their hands, while they watched the looting of their bank and post office. And there had been other occasions as bad as that one.

Sometimes the yeggmen traveled in small groups; sometimes they worked in twos or threes, but often they went about in large bands which had been known to include as many as fifty or even more.

Had the outrages been confined to one community the inhabitants would have risen in their might and, by organizing vigilance committees, could have driven them out—possibly. But they were not confined to communities at all; they extended all along the line of the railroad, and the descent of the robbers seemed always to have been arranged far ahead—and perfectly planned by a master mind at that.

These descents always happened when it was known that there were large sums of money, either in the banks that were robbed, or when the post offices that were broken open were better provided than usual with cash.

At every place where there was a siding along the line of the railroad, freight cars had been broken open, and denuded of their contents; and this often happened when there was one or more night watchmen on hand for the purpose of preventing that very thing.

But in each case the watchman had been overpowered, and either beaten into insensibility or maimed—and in at least one instance—killed.

And hence it was that the railroad company was willing to pay well for the apprehension of the chief of these marauders.

All of this information Nick Carter gleaned before he formed any definite plans for his campaign.

Roughly speaking, there was a stretch of main line of the railroad over which, or rather along which, the yeggmen seemed to be most active. This principal thoroughfare for their nefarious trade was approximately five hundred miles long; and it was here where the greatest and the most persistent outrages were committed.

There were branches of the line, too, along which they worked; but off the main line the organization seemed to lose some of its power for concentration of force.

After Nick had pieced together all the information that could be gleaned without being actually at the scene of the trouble, he called his three assistants together in consultation with him. For he had determined to make use of all of them in this case. Indeed, that was the only method by which he believed that he could entirely succeed at it.

To them he related the circumstance of his connection with the case, after which he told them all he had been able to learn about it; and in conclusion he said:

"Now, lads, there is only one way by which we can hope to succeed in this undertaking, and that is, we must become hoboes ourselves."

The three nodded almost in unison.

"If we decide to do that," continued the detective,

"we must do it thoroughly. We must do as General Grant did when he decided, against the wishes of his generals, to invest Vicksburg—be cut off from his base of supplies; and that is what we must do."

"I don't think I understand exactly what you mean," said Patsy, who was paying close attention; for Patsy liked the plan inconceivably.

"I mean," replied Nick, "that when we start out to become hoboes, we must become so in fact, and not in appearance merely. It is easy enough for any one of us to make ourself up as a tramp, or a hobo, or even a yeggman, and to play the part; but in this case we must do more than that: We must be the part."

"But that 'base of supplies' business—what do you mean by that?" insisted Patsy.

"I mean that when we start out on this case, there will be no returning here until we have lodged Hobo Harry behind the bars. We are going to live as hoboes, and do as hoboes do, carrying out a real robbery or so, on our own hooks, taking care, of course, that one or more of the real article shall know about it."

"And taking care also," interjected Chick, "that we keep track of what we steal, so that it, or its value, may be returned to the owners later on."

"Of course, Chick; that goes without saying. Now, there is another thing."

"At the present time there are no less than fifty detectives, some from Pinkerton's, and some from other places, engaged upon this case. If we play our parts as we should play them, we are bound to run into some of those chaps sooner or later. If we do that——"

"Well?" asked Patsy.

"We must continue to play our cards to the end, no matter what happens—even to the extent of being arrested, and possibly tried for the offenses that have been committed. If one of us should get caught, he must play his part even then, for the protection of the others who are still on their jobs; for if that one should confess himself a detective, the usefulness of the others would be past."

"That is clear enough," said Ten-Ichi.

"It sure is," said Patsy. "It isn't very pleasant, either. Although it will be some fun to work on the opposite side of the fence for once."

"How do you mean?" asked Ten-Ichi.

"Why, we are always chasing down criminals, aren't we? Now we will have some fun in letting others chase us while we play the criminal. Say, chief?"

"Well?"

"We will have a chance to learn a little about that other side of the fence. We will discover how it feels to be chased, instead of doing the chasing."

"Yes," said the detective; and Patsy turned then to Ten-Ichi.

"I'll make you a bet," he said. "I'll bet you anything you like, on the basis of two to one, that I don't get nabbed while we are on this lay."

"That's a go," smiled Ten-Ichi, "for I think you will be the very first one to go under."

"How much do you want to bet?"

"Never mind the betting part of it, lads," Nick interrupted them. "The point is, that each of you is to do his utmost to carry out his part to the end, no matter what happens. Now, if you please, all step this way. I have a map here that I wish to show you."

He spread the map upon the table, and upon it he showed them the five hundred miles of railway along which they were to work; and presently he put his finger upon the name of a town along the line, and he said:

"Here is a place called Calamont. It is, roughly speaking, two hundred and fifty miles from New York. Some time ago Calamont suffered greatly by the descent of the hoboes upon it. It has not quite recovered from the effects of that time yet, although several months have elapsed since the occurrence. Do you see it, all of you?"

They admitted that they did.

"Right here," he continued, drawing his pencil with which he was pointing a little to the eastward, "is a patch of woods through which the railway runs. There are about twenty acres of woodland there, and the road passes through the centre of it."

They nodded, and he went on:

"To the south of the railroad, through the woods, is a swamp. It is almost an impassable swamp, I am told. I will have more to say about that part of it presently. Understand, do you?"

They did understand.

"To the north of the tracks, through the woodland and beyond it, the country is hilly and almost mountainous. There is a limestone formation there. There are deep ravines and gulches, high cliffs and precipices, and, although I stated in the first place that there is only about twenty acres in the woodland, I meant to say in that particular patch of woods to which I first drew your attention."

"Yes," said Chick.

"As a matter of fact, the country all around this region is wild and unsettled. It is much too rough to settle, and there are woods and forests everywhere. Just beyond these woods, to the northward, the forest is almost unbroken for several miles, save that there is a narrow clearing to separate this particular bit of woods from those beyond it."

"Well?" asked Chick, who was paying close attention.

"To the south of the tracks it is almost the same, save that the country is flat and low. As a matter of fact, the railroad passes across the spur which lies between the rough country to the north and the flat, swampy country to the south.

"I have not been able to gain any very exact information about those swamps, but from the best opinions I can get, I should assume that it is a sort of another Dismal Swamp down there. Men and cattle, horses and sheep have been known to wander in there, and never return. Presumably they were lost in the swamps or——"

"Or else eaten up by the yeggmen," suggested Patsy.

"Precisely. But it is a wild country. Now"—he rested one finger upon the map—"right here at the point where my finger rests, two weeks from to-morrow, at or near the hour of darkness, I will meet each of you. You will find me just north of the track; or, if any of you get there before I do, you will wait there for me, and for the others. Whoever arrives first must build a fire. We part to-night, here, now. You must each leave the house separately, and become lost to the world—you must each become a hobo in the meantime, in your own particular way. Fix yourselves up as you please, and go where you please—only go separately. And keep your appointment for two weeks from to-morrow. That's all."

CHAPTER II.

THE YEGGMEN'S CAMP FIRE.

Each of the detective's three assistants understood thoroughly that Nick Carter's reason for directing them to do as he did was that they might each have learned the parts they had to play thoroughly by the time the actual work of it should begin.

And not only that, they would have had two weeks during which to wear off the newness of habit and apparel; and by the time they arrived at the place of meeting, each would have become sufficiently schooled in his part to play it quite naturally.

And there was still another reason which Nick hoped they would take advantage of, although he said nothing about it: That was that they would make acquaintances among such of the ilk as they happened to meet. Such acquaintances might be of value later in the game.

When Chick left the house, about two hours after the interview with Nick, he had his traveling bag in his hand, and he went direct to the railway station, where he took a train for the West—for a city far beyond the line of the road upon which Nick Carter's campaign was to be worked out. It was his intention to start from there.

Ten-Ichi took his departure a little sooner than Chick, and he was dressed as usual, also. Outside the house, on the curb, he stopped for a few moments, and appeared to be thinking; and then he started down the street on foot, and disappeared.

Patsy was the last to go, except the chief himself, who was smilingly watching these departures from an upper window of the house. He had said no more than he did to them purposely, for he was curious to see how each would go about it. He knew that each one of his assistants was

entirely proficient in his way, but he also knew that each had a way of his own for doing things.

When Patsy left the house he also hesitated in front of it for a moment; and then he walked rapidly away up the street, and disappeared.

And that was all that Nick cared to see; he wished to feel assured that each had departed on his own hook, and that it was their intention to work singly. He had left the map for them to study in the library after he left them alone together, and he had no doubt that each would be fully competent to find the place of appointment when the time should come.

He was the last to leave the house, of course. There were many directions to give before he finally took his departure. Joseph had to know how to account for his absence from home to those who might inquire too particularly about him; and the absence of the three assistants had to be accounted for also.

Having arranged that, and provided himself with everything which he regarded as needful, he selected one of his own disguises—one that he was fond of, and which will appear more particularly later on, and with that in a small satchel which he expected ultimately to rid himself of, he went out, and away also.

And from that moment we will skip to the time of the opening paragraphs of this story, which was two weeks and one day later—to the time when we behold the camp fire made of railway ties, with the four hoboes grouped around it, having enjoyed their evening meal and now ready to smoke and rest; for if there is anything in the world which a hobo really enjoys, it is rest.

It was only a little bit after dark—and the night was not a dark one at that. Already the moon was shining down upon the world.

But around the immediate vicinity of the camp fire it seemed quite dark by contrast, and the light thrown back by the trunks of the trees rendered the scene a picturesque one.

Nick Carter had purposely been the last one to arrive at the trysting place, if such it may be termed; but he had been a close observer of the arrival of the others, nevertheless; and he accomplished that by arriving in the vicinity early in the day, and by later climbing among the boughs of one of the trees, from which perch he was enabled to watch the coming of his assistants.

Patsy came first. His eagerness led him to do that, and Nick had expected it; and as the detective watched his youngest assistant he was pleased to see the manner in which he made his approach.

Had Nick Carter, concealed in the boughs of the tree, been an enemy, instead of a friend, he could not have had one suspicion aroused by Patsy's manner.

The young fellow was most disreputable in appearance. His hair, and it was his own, too, he had managed to dye to brick-red hue. His face and his hands were grimy, and there was a considerable growth of beard upon the former. He wore good shoes—just out of a store, they appeared to be, and he carried a string of three other pairs, equally new, in one hand. His coat was much too large for him, and he had turned the sleeves back at the wrists for convenience. His hat had once been a Stetson; it had also quite evidently been a target for a shotgun.

When Nick first spied him he was walking along the track, whistling; but directly opposite the place of meeting he stopped, and, after a moment, he dived quickly over the fence into the woods, and approached with care the place which he finally selected for the fire.

And there he scraped some dried boughs together, made his fire, brought an old tie from the track to aid it, arranged his crane of green sticks, and, from a

bundle that he carried slung upon one shoulder, he produced the kettle, a package of meat, some bread, and other articles, with which he began the preparation of his supper.

A little later a second figure appeared so suddenly out of the gathering gloom that neither Patsy, at the fire, nor Nick, in the tree, had any idea of its near approach.

"Hello, pal!" he said gruffly; and Patsy wheeled like lightning, with a gun already half drawn, to face him.

"Hello yourself!" he growled, not too cordially, and eying the newcomer suspiciously. "Who are you lookin' for?"

The other came slowly forward without deigning to reply to this direct question, and without so much as glancing again at Patsy; but he slung his own bundle on the ground, and, after a moment, stalked away in the gathering darkness again.

Presently he returned with another tie, which he dropped near the fire; and then he looked sullenly toward Patsy.

"Share up, or chuck it alone?" he demanded, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

"What you got?"

"As much as you have, and as good as you have."

"All right. I'm agreeable. Chuck it down."

Half an hour later, when it was almost dark, a third one appeared.

He was shorter and slimmer than the others, and the best dressed one of the three, although he was disreputable enough in all conscience.

He came noisily over the fence from the track, and the two at the fire could hear him long before he reached them. But they made no move.

Anybody who approached them with as much noise as that was not to be dreaded, it appeared.

When he arrived within the circle of the firelight, he stopped and strangely enough began to laugh; and he laughed on, boisterously, amazingly, in fact; he laughed until there were tears in his eyes, and until he had to hold to a sapling near him for support.

"Aw, what's eatin' you?" called out one of the men from the fire. "What you see that's so funny; must be in your own globes. Come along inside if you wants to, and don't stand there awakin' up the dead."

"I ain't got any chuck of my own," he called back to them. "I was laughing to think how near I came to getting it—and didn't."

"Well, there's enough here for three—'r four, for that matter. Come in and set down, pal."

And it was not until the meal was cooked, and spread out upon all sorts of improvised arrangements, that the fourth member of the party appeared—and he made his arrival in a most surprising manner.

He dropped literally among them, seemingly from the clouds—or the tree—just as they were beginning to eat; and he squatted beside them, and, reaching out without a word, helped himself to a hunk of the toasted meat, which he began to tear viciously with his teeth.

"Nice guy, ain't he?" said Patsy, leering at the one with whom he had agreed to share.

"Looks as if he might have come over in the steerage of a cattle ship, inside a rawhide, don't he?" assented the other, who was Chick. But neither Chick nor Patsy was at all assured that this new arrival was their chief, and they determined to play their parts to the end, or, at least, until they were absolutely certain.

In reality Nick Carter looked like a Sicilian bandit in hard luck. He certainly looked the Italian part of it, all right; but even among his rags there was some display of color, which an Italian is never happy without.

When the other referred to him in this slighting way, he raised his eyes sullenly toward them, and he also released his hold upon the food he was eating long enough to finger the hilt of his knife suggestively; for Nick was aware of the fact that not one of the three was sure of his identity, and he preferred not to make himself known just yet.

"Me understands da Inglis you spik," he muttered, in a sort of growl. "Better hava da care wota you say dees times. I hava da bunch uh banan in da tree ifa you want more chuck. Go getta it—you!"

He drew his knife quickly and leveled the point of it at the one whom the others had already christened 'Laughing Willie'; but Ten-Ichi, nothing daunted by the implied threat, only shrugged his shoulders, and went on eating.

"Go getta da banan, or I slice you up fora de chuck," repeated the supposed Italian, rising slowly from his seat by the fire and advancing toward Ten-Ichi; but he had not taken a step before he found himself looking into the muzzle of a pistol, and Patsy, in his capacity as host over the meal, said sourly:

"Sit ye down, dago, or I'll make a window of your liver. We're three friends enjoying a feast, and you're welcome to part of it if you want it, but if you make any more breaks, out you go—feet first, if you prefer it that way."

The Italian subsided with a grunt, and the meal continued undisturbed until all but Ten-Ichi, who appeared to have been really very hungry, had drawn back from the fire; and then it was that Chick made the remark about his hurrying that was mentioned in the beginning of this story.

But Nick had in the meantime managed to make it known to the others who he was, although he had said no word in reference to it. They each one of them knew that there might still be others concealed in the trees or somewhere near at hand watching them. There was no telling how many pairs of eyes had observed them when they entered the wood. Yeggmen are as cautious and as careful about what they do in the lonely places among their brethren as the cave man used to be in primitive times.

For they prey upon one another, those men, as readily as they prey upon society. Among them it is always merely a question of the survival of the fittest—and the fittest is always the quickest, and the strongest, or the most alert.

It was not likely that they would have this firelight to themselves for a very long time, and they knew it; and, in fact, it was not ten minutes after their meal was finished, and their pipes were alight, before, like shadows, three other men suddenly loomed beside the fire, as if they had sprung out of the ground.

And they stalked forward from three sides at once—came forward as if they owned the woods.

But not one of our four friends, already seated there, made a motion or uttered a word. They smoked stolidly on, but with their eyes alert for anything that might happen.

And then, out of the darkness around them, appeared three more figures, and then two more; and the eight, who had seemed to come together, grouped themselves with their backs to the fire, and gazed sullenly and silently down upon the four they found there.

CHAPTER III.

THE "KING'S" LIEUTENANT.

The moment was an ominous one, and no one was better aware of the fact than Nick Carter. Everything depended now upon the perfection which his three assistants had attained in the parts they were to play.

The sudden coming of the eight yeggmen, arriving as they had, so closely together, could not be the result of mere chance, and Nick had no doubt that they were in reality members of the very gang he was seeking. For the detective had determined in the beginning that the headquarters of the gang was somewhere in this vicinity. Everything in his first investigations pointed to that. And if their headquarters were located near that wood, or below the track in the swamp, it was certain that they kept outposts stationed where the arrival of newcomers could be reported at once.

Thus the appearance of Nick Carter on the scene, and the coming of the others soon after his arrival, had doubtless been reported, and their actions carefully watched from the very beginning.

The detective was intensely glad now that his own actions, and those of his friends, had been so perfect—that is, perfect in the sense of creating the impression in the mind of a possible observer that they were strangers to one another. He knew perfectly well that if a watch had been kept upon them there could be no doubt in the minds of the watchers that the four men grouped around the fire were unknown to one another.

But here were eight burly men grouped around them, each standing in a position so that he could make himself extremely dangerous on the instant should he choose to do so. And there was no telling how many

more might be concealed out there in the darkness of the woods around them.

It is not the fashion among yeggmen to welcome an addition to their party, no matter whether that addition is composed of one or of many. Sullen silence is the rule at first, during which each man studies the others. Suspicion is always the first impulse at such meetings. Their attitudes are exactly that of strange dogs which encounter each other for the first time, and walk round and round, with the hair on their backs raised, and with their tails straight out, every nerve on a tension, and every impulse prepared for mortal combat.

And people who have watched dogs while they go through with these mannerisms know that it requires only a few moments for them to determine whether they will be friends or foes, or if they will only politely tolerate the presence of each other on the scene.

So Nick Carter sat silent, making no movement, save to puff vigorously at the short pipe he was smoking; and so the others of his party did likewise; for the forces of the newcomers were much stronger.

This tableau—if tableau it could be called, continued for five minutes, and then one of the late arrivals cast aside the stub of a cigar he was smoking, and broke the silence.

"Where might you hoboes be from?" he demanded, in an even tone, and without a gesture of any kind.

Nobody made any reply whatever to this question, and after a moment he spoke again.

"Which one of you is the leader of this outfit?" he asked.

Again nobody replied to him; the assistants kept silent because they well knew that their chief would answer if he considered it wise to do so; and

Nick remained silent merely because he did not consider that it was yet time to speak.

And now the spokesman of the other party addressed himself directly to Nick Carter, as being, doubtless, the fiercest and most villainous-looking one of the bunch.

"You heard me, didn't you?" he demanded.

"Yes; I heard you," was the calm reply.

"Hello! You can talk United States, can't you?"

"Quite as well as you, if necessary," was the cool response.

"You look like a dago."

"What I look like, and what I am, is none of your business—unless you show some authority for questioning me."

"Ho, ho, ho, ho! Hear him, my coveys! What do you think of that?" And then to Nick again: "What sort of authority do you expect me to show?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders, knocked out the ashes of his pipe, rose slowly to his feet, and stood facing the other calmly, as he responded:

"There is only one kind of authority, signor, in a party like this. You know what that is. I don't know you any more than I know these other guns around here. It may all be a put-up job, for all I know. I don't much care if it is. I am quite willing to fight you all, one at a time, if necessary—and with guns, or knives, or fists, as you please. I come here, and I get into a tree and wait. Why? Because I have been told of this place, and that always there is somebody around here. I thought I would see who the somebody was before somebody saw me. So I get myself into a tree. Pish! And then not only one, but two, and three arrive on the scene; and then eight more come. If you want to know who I am, and are brave

enough to fight me, and man enough to lick me—then you'll know. If not —mind your own affairs, and leave me to attend to mine."

It was a long speech, and the others listened in absolute silence to the end of it. But the instant Nick ceased speaking, the man to whom he had addressed his remarks drew back his arm with a sudden motion, and drove his huge fist forward with the quickness of a cat.

Any other person than Nick Carter might have felt the force of that treacherous blow. Even he might have done so had he not been expecting it, and, therefore, been entirely ready for it.

But the bony fist of the man struck only the empty air, for Nick sidestepped in a manner that would have made Jim Corbett, in his palmiest days, green with envy; and the battering-ram flew past his ear harmlessly.

And then the man who had delivered it, before he could recover from the effect of his own effort, found himself seized in a viselike grip, raised from his feet, and hurled backward straight over the fire, and beyond it, so that he sprawled at full length among the bushes.

He leaped to his feet with a curse, and his hand flew to his hip pocket in search of a weapon; but he did not draw it forth again, for he found himself looking into the muzzle of an ugly-looking forty-four.

"Drop it!" Nick ordered sharply. "I didn't hurt you, when I might have done so easily. Are you satisfied?"

The anger of the man seemed to pass as quickly as it had arisen, and he grinned as he slowly resumed his former position beside the fire.

It was quite true that he was not hurt; it was equally true that he knew that this stranger might have hurt him severely had he chosen to do so, and have been entirely excusable for doing it too.

"All right, pard, you pass," he said. "What's your handle?"

"I'm called Dago John by them as know me. What's yours?"

"Hand—— The guns call me Handsome, by way of shortening it. Shake?"

"Yes," said Nick; and they clasped hands for an instant. Then Handsome added:

"Who might these gazaboes be?"

"Search me, Handsome," growled Nick, resuming his seat, and beginning to refill his pipe. "If they ain't a part of your outfit, they sure ain't a part of mine."

Handsome wheeled upon Chick then.

"Who are you?" he demanded, "and where are you from?"

"I'm the 'Chicken'; they know me around Chicago, if they don't here. Maybe you've heard of me; but it don't make any difference whether you have or not. I'm the Chicken, all right; and it's Chick for short." Chick did not so much as move an eyelash while he made this retort; but his questioner was plainly affected.

"The Chicken!" he exclaimed. "The Chicken is dead. We got it straight. Shot by——"

"Shot by a cop, eh? That's the story, and it goes, all right. Only it happens that it wasn't the Chicken as was shot; cause why? The Chicken is here."

"Who was it, then?"

"It was a pal of mine. A likely gun he was, too. I jest changed hats with him when he slid under. The rest of the clothes didn't make no difference. They thought he was the Chicken—and it didn't hurt him any to have 'em think so, while it helped me a lot."

"All right, Chicken," said Handsome, extending his hand a second time. "I know about you. You're all right. Who are these other two?"

"Search me, Handsome. I reckon we're all strangers."

Handsome turned to Ten-Ichi.

"What's your handle, covey?" he growled.

Ten-Ichi's answer was a peal of demoniac laughter; and he laughed on and on interminably, slapping his thighs and flinging his arms around him after the manner of a man who is warming himself, until the faces of the others around him developed broad grins—and until the man who called himself Handsome brought him to with a sudden thrust of his arm which nearly took the breath out of the lad.

"What's eatin' you, you loon?" he demanded.

"I was laughing," replied Ten-Ichi, now as solemn as an owl.

"You don't say so! Were you? What at?"

"You. It is so funny that you should be called Handsome."

Handsome grinned with the others.

"Well," he said. "What's your name? Out with it!"

"I'm Tenstrike—Ten, for short. That's what."

"All right, Ten; you pass. You're harmless, I guess—unless you let out that laugh of yours at the wrong time. I would advise you not to do that. And *you*?" He turned now to Patsy, with a sudden whirl of his body. "You were the first of this bunch to get here. Who are you?"

"Sure," said Patsy, with a slow drawl, "I'm an Irishman, and me name doesn't matter to you. It's enough that they call me Pat. If ye don't happen to like it, sure you can call me Tim, or Mike, or Shamus, or any

old thing that suits ye. And what am I here for, is it? Sure, I'm on a still hunt for a man I want to find. Mebby ye're after knowin' him."

"Maybe I am. Who is he?"

"Faith, I wish I knowed that. He calls himself Hobo Harry—that same!"

A dead silence followed upon this unlooked-for announcement. The boldness of it surprised Nick, startled Chick, and frightened Ten-Ichi, lest unpleasant results should come of it. But it was evident that Patsy knew his ground, and had prepared for this very moment, for he was cool and smiling, and he appeared to enjoy hugely the effect that his words had had upon the others.

It was Handsome who finally broke the silence that ensued; and he replied:

"That's a name, Pat—if that's your own handle—which isn't spoken lightly around these parts. What do you want with him?"

"By your l'ave, mister, I'll tell that to him when I find him. In the meantime, if youse be afther mindin' yere own business, it wouldn't hurrt ye any. Ye seem to be making of yerself a sort of highcockalorum elegantarium bosski. If ye tell me that ye know Hobo Harry, an' will take me to him, so's I can tell me story to him, mebby I'll answer ye; but not unless."

Again there was silence; and this time it was Nick who brought it to an end.

"Handsome," he said sharply, "who's this other bunch? What I want to know is, are they wid you?"

"They are," was the quick reply. Then he wheeled quickly to Patsy again, and added:

"Come with me—you—if you want to see the chief. I'll take you to him. The rest of you can wait where you are."

CHAPTER IV.

THE OUTLAW'S HOME.

A dead silence reigned around that camp fire for several moments after the two departed; but then the seven strangers who were left seated themselves in various attitudes, filled their pipes—or lit the stubs of half-smoked cigars, produced from their pockets; and after that, little by little, conversation was indulged in.

The night was warm and balmy. There was no reason why any of them should seek other shelter than the boughs of the trees which already covered them; but Nick knew from the manner in which Handsome had left them that he expected to return, and that there was some other place near by to which he intended to take them—if the chief should say the word. And he saw now that Patsy, by rare forethought, had prepared for that very emergency.

More than an hour had passed before Handsome made his appearance again; and then he loomed suddenly beside the camp fire, as silently and as stealthily as an Indian. Even Nick Carter, who was on the alert for his approach, did not hear him coming.

"I'll take you now!" he said briefly to Nick. "The others can wait."

Without a word more he turned away again, and Nick, leaping to his feet, followed him in silence through the darkness.

The night was almost black in there among the trees, although the moon was shining above them; but nevertheless Nick had no difficulty in following his guide.

They made directly for the railway tracks, and crossed the fence that intervened; but when they reached the top of the grade, Nick's guide halted and faced him.

"You said you are Dago John," he said slowly. "Who might Dago John be, pard?"

"They call me Dago John because I look like an Italian, I suppose, although I am not one," replied the detective. "But I try to carry out the idea. If you have worked your way through the South at all, maybe you've heard of Sheeny John. It will do as well as Dago John. A name doesn't make much difference."

"It makes a sight of difference here, my friend. What's your lay?"

"Anything that I can turn my hand to—or my brains."

"You have an education?"

"Yes."

"Can you write a good hand?"

"It's my one fault that I can—too good a one."

"Have you looked through the screens?" (Been in prison.)

"Never yet—to stay there. What do you want to know all this for?"

"I've been telling the main guy about you."

"What about me?"

"I told him of your strength, for one thing. There isn't another man in our outfit who could lift me off my feet the way you did it."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"I could have done it as easily if you had been twice the man you are," he said contemptuously.

"There is no doubt of that. I don't bear you any ill will for it, either. Neither does the boss."

"And who may he be, Handsome?"

"Don't you know, Dago John?"

"Maybe I do, and again maybe I don't."

"Didn't you come here looking for him?"

"Maybe so."

"Well, who were you looking for?"

"Maybe the same one that the other fellow was looking for—maybe not."

"That's all right. You can come along, I guess. But I warn you to have a care what you say to him."

"Say to who?"

"To Hobo Harry. He isn't one to be trifled with."

"Say, Handsome, on the level now, *is* there such a person?"

"Sure there is. You'll find that out all right, too, before you are much older. Didn't you come up here to get into the gang? Isn't that what you are here for?"

"Sure thing; but, on the level, I didn't think that I could do it so easy."

Handsome laughed as if he were intensely amused.

"If you think that you are in it now, you are very much mistaken," he said, with a shrug. "We don't take men into the bosom of our family quite as easy as that. But with us there is always room for a good man, and he always has a chance to prove whether he is good or not. That is the sort of chance you are going to get."

"Will you tell me about it?"

"I will if you will agree to teach me that hold by which you threw me over the fire into the bushes a little while ago."

"Sure thing, Handsome. I'll teach you that, and a lot of others as well, if you wish. That is one of the ju-jutsu tricks."

"I've heard about that. It's all right, all right."

"Sure thing. Now, where are we going? Are we to stay here all night, Handsome?"

"Not quite."

"Tell me what is expected of me, then; where we are going?"

"I am to take you to the chief; to Hobo Harry himself, for he happens to be here to-night. It is only once in a while tha he is here, too; but it happens that he is to-night. He is to interview you. Otherwise—that is, if he were not here, you would have to hang around on the outside until he showed up to pass upon you in person."

"I see."

"He is the only man in the whole bunch who has a right to do that. I've got to blindfold you after we get across the fence on the swamp side of the tracks."

"All right."

"I suppose you would like to know what you are up against before I take you into the old swamp, wouldn't you?"

"Sure thing, Handsome."

"Well, it's just this: If you don't pass muster with the boss, you'll never come out again. There are deep holes in that swamp, Dago."

"Oh, I don't doubt that; but what do you mean by passing muster?"

"I mean just this, and nothing more: If you are not what you appear to be, and what you say you are, it's a slit across the windpipe for yours; see?"

Nick did see, and he nodded understandingly.

"I reckon I'll pass, all right," he said negligently. "If you are ready, I am."

They descended the embankment, and climbed the fence on the swamp side of the tracks; and then, as soon as they had penetrated a short distance into the wood, Handsome stopped again, and, drawing a huge bandanna from his pocket, proceeded to bind it around the detective's eyes securely.

"Now," he said, "can you do the lockstep?"

"Never tried it," said Nick.

"Sure about that?"

"Never learned—never had to."

"Well, you'll have to learn it now—unless you wish to fall into the swamp. Get up close to me, and take hold of my sides under my arms. Then follow in my footsteps as nearly as you can."

"I say, Handsome, you've got some education yourself."

"Never mind that now. We're not going into pasts just at present."

"All right. Lead the way. I'm ready."

Nick's eyes were so securely bandaged that he had not the least idea where they were going, or where his footsteps tended; but even had he been without the bandage he could hardly have told that, for the deeper they penetrated into the swamp, the darker it became, and only those

who were perfectly familiar with the pathway could pass that way in safety in the night.

There were times when Nick's feet slipped from the precarious footing, and he slid into the water up to his knees; and once he went in to his waist; but Handsome was always ready to seize upon him and support him to dry land again at such times.

And their way wound round in a serpentine course. They climbed over fallen and moss-grown logs; they slushed through shallow water; they crawled on their hands and knees under embankments and rocks, and at last, at Handsome's order, they stepped into a boat of some kind which the latter pushed away from the bank with a pole.

After that a long time passed while the boat was propelled steadily onward with the pole, sometimes gliding under trees that hung so close to the water that they were obliged to get flat down inside the scow to avoid them; and they wound around many curves and twists, until at last they stopped, and Handsome removed the bandage from Nick's eyes.

They were beside a high bank, and directly ahead of them, through the trees, the detective could see the lights of many gleaming fires; and he could also discern the shadowy forms of men grouped around them, engaged in different occupations.

"Now, keep your mouth shut, and your eyes and your ears open," was Handsome's warning, as he led the way from the scow, and signed for Nick to follow him. "If anybody speaks to you, don't answer; and when you get in the presence of the chief, answer questions, and don't ask any."

"Right you are, pardy," was Nick's reply; and then he followed his conductor through the trees toward the fire.

They came out presently upon an open glade in which a dozen camp fires were burning. At some of these men were engaged in eating; others

were preparing to eat; and still others had finished their meal, and were lying around in various attitudes, smoking. Some were playing cards by the light of the fires. Nick judged, in the rapid estimate he made, that there were in all at least twoscore of men gathered there.

He saw, too, that around this circular glade there were sheds built, and some of these had lights behind the brush or canvas fronts. Two of them had board fronts, and he judged that they were used when the weather was too inclement, or too cold, to remain in the open.

As they passed through the circle of light cast by the fires, many of the men looked up lazily toward them; but beyond one stare, no attention was paid to them; and they passed on into the gloom beyond.

Here they traversed a narrow but well-beaten pathway through the thick growth of alders, and presently came out upon a second glade that was larger than the first; and higher and dryer, too.

But that was not what attracted the detective.

In the very centre of this patch of clearing was a house; or a cottage, it would more properly be called; but it was large, and apparently comfortable. The roof extended down in front of it and over a wide piazza, where Nick could see that two men and a woman were seated.

But directly in front of the piazza, a man—one of the hoboes, without doubt, to judge from his appearance—was pacing regularly up and down, with the precision of a sentinel; and he carried a rifle in the hollow of his arm, which, as soon as Handsome and Nick appeared, he raised and pointed at them, while Nick could hear the click of the lock as he raised the hammer.

Handsome threw up both hands, holding them high over his head, and Nick did the same; and thereupon the gun was lowered, and, still with their hands held high, the two men advanced.

There was not a word spoken; the sentinel resumed his pacing up and down, as if there had been no interruption; and Nick's guide approached the edge of the piazza, still with his hands raised.

One of the men who were seated there rose and stepped forward; then he peered long and earnestly at the two men, and then he said:

"You may advance. Go inside."

And as they crossed the piazza, and stepped inside the house, the woman of the group rose and followed them, closing the door behind her; and Nick Carter wondered if Hobo Harry, the Beggar King, was a woman.

CHAPTER V.

NICK'S WONDERFUL STRENGTH.

When Nick Carter gazed upon the woman who stood before them, with her hands clasped behind her, he thought that he had never seen another like her. She could not by any stretch of the imagination have been called beautiful; she was too masculine in her appearance for that—that is, the expression of her face, her manner, and the position she assumed were masculine; but the suggestion of it ended there.

She was as tall or taller than the detective, and her complexion was as dark as the hue to which he had stained his own. Her eyes were large, and round, and full, and fierce, and she held her head, with its crown of dead-black hair, as if she were monarch of all she surveyed. And the strangest part of it all was that she did not appear to be more than twenty years old.

With a steady stare she took in every detail of Nick's appearance, from the top of his head to the shoes he wore on his feet; and then she turned slowly to Handsome.

"Whom have we here?" she demanded.

"Dago John, he calls himself," was the reply.

"The man you spoke of?"

"Yes."

"Who is so strong that he could throw you over the fire into the bushes, and who did not harm you when he might have done so, after you had struck at him with your fist?"

"The same."

She turned her attention to Nick then.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Just what you see, missus; no more and no less," replied Nick, speaking boldly, for he deemed that to be the surest way to her favor.

"I see very little; nothing whatever that betokens the strength you are said to possess."

"You can't always tell what's inside of a crib before you crack it," was the reply; and the woman smiled.

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"I ain't giving out my past history, lady, if it's all the same to you," said Nick coolly; and she frowned. Evidently she did not like this answer.

"What errand brought you to this part of the country, and finally induced you to make your camp in the woods out there?" she asked, smiling again.

"I suppose you want the plain truth, lady?"

"Yes," she replied, in an easy tone; "that is, if you put any value on your life."

"Well, the truth is this: I have heard, here and there, a good deal about a certain person who is known as Hobo Harry, the Beggar King. I have heard that he has gathered around him a lot of my kind, and I

reckoned that maybe he'd give me a show to be one of them. That's what I came here for, and that's why I camped out there in the woods."

"And who are the three men who came with you?"

"Nobody came with me. I came alone."

"There were three other men there when Handsome found you? No?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Handsome can tell you that as well, or better, than I. He did the questioning."

"Why do you want to join the forces of Hobo Harry?"

"Because I'm tired of going it alone, and because I have heard that he takes good care of his followers."

"What can you do?"

"I can do anything that I am told to, once I have acknowledged a chief."

"That is a good answer. It covers a good deal of ground. Now, who told you about Hobo Harry?"

"I have heard about him in a good many places."

"Who told you where to find him?"

"A gun friend of mine, who croaked down in Indianapolis, a month ago or more. Jimmy the Sly he was called." (It was true that there had been a Jimmy the Sly, who was one of the many of the band who had been arrested and imprisoned; and after his release he had gone to Indianapolis, and died there, in a hospital. Nick knew this from his interview with the railroad president, and therefore he was not afraid to make use of the name.)

"So you knew Jimmy the Sly, did you?"

"Yes."

"Describe him to me."

"He was tall and slender, with a pock-marked face, and the longest fingers I ever saw; and he had a wart on the side of his nose, and a——"

"That will do. That is sufficient. How comes it that Jimmy never mentioned you to me?"

"You'll have to ask Jimmy that, I reckon—and you might burn yourself if you undertook to do it. I reckon it's hot where Jimmy is, madam."

She smiled at this. Nick could see that he was making a good impression upon her. He was still wondering if she were indeed the chief, or if she were only his representative. It was certain that he had had no expectation of finding a woman in this place.

"And what do you wish me to do with you, now that you are here?"

"I reckon that I'll have to leave that to you. I didn't come with my eyes shut. I guessed pretty well what I was up against. But I came here to be made one of you, and I hope you will give me a chance."

"What do you know of Hobo Harry?"

"Nothing."

"What do you think he is?"

"The head gazabo of this bunch."

"What do you suppose he is like?"

"Just at present writing, madam, he looks to me very much like a beautiful woman who has the grace of a siren and the courage of a lion."

"You should be a Frenchman instead of an Italian."

"I am neither one nor the other. I'm just a—a yeggman."

"You were about to say something else."

"I was going to say—a crook."

"You have not been a yeggman always, have you?"

"I never knew anybody who had been, madam."

"You are not really a yeggman, or a hobo. Confess the truth now; aren't you under cover, and playing the rôle for the purpose of being out of sight for a time?"

"I'm willing to say yes, if it pleases you."

"What has been your line of work, Dago?"

"Well, I'm a fair penman; I'm a good mechanic; I could be a passable druggist if I tried, and I wouldn't shy at taking a hand at running a bank, if it was big enough for the risk."

"I begin to think that you are all right, Dago."

"You can betcher life that I'm all right, madam, if it comes to that. But I don't reckon that you'll take me on my say-so. You'll be wanting some sort of proof of me before you consent to take me into the fold."

"You are correct about that."

"I'm ready for anything."

"You have told me that you are a penman, which means that you could be a forger; you have said that you are a mechanic, which means that you could crack a crib if necessary; you called yourself a druggist, which means that you know how to use the chemicals, and the poisons, too, if necessary; and you would not refuse to tackle a bank job if one should

come your way. Do you happen to have the mark of blood against you, too?"

"I don't suppose there is any mark that I haven't got."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Well, I wouldn't stay in a house if I wanted to get out when a live man stood in my way, if that is what you mean."

The woman turned to Handsome quite suddenly.

"What time do you start?" she asked of him; and he replied, as if the question were a continuance of their conversation:

"I ought to start now—inside of ten minutes."

"Very good," she said. "Take Dago with you. Break him in. Let him have the worst of it. If he makes good, all right. If he doesn't—shoot him."

"All right," said Handsome cheerfully. "What about the others? There are two more out there near the tracks."

"I will attend to them. Go, now. Take this man with you. Give him all the rope he needs—but watch him. I'd sooner trust him with you than anybody else, anyhow—and I believe he is all right."

"Come!" said Handsome, seizing Nick by the arm; and he pulled him through the door after him. But all the way to the door, Nick kept his eyes upon the woman, who was looking at him strangely, and with a curious smile on her face.

Outside, when they had passed the sentinel, and were again in the part which led to the other glade, he stopped.

"Wait a minute, Handsome," he said. "I want to ask you a question."

"There isn't time now, Dago. Save it until later. We must get away from here at once. Do you remember where we left the boat?"

"Yes."

"Go there alone, and wait there for me. I won't be three minutes."

He did not await a reply, but darted off to one side as soon as they reached the glade, and Nick saw him disappear inside one of the cabins before referred to.

"I am in for it now, to the whole length of the tether," he told himself, as he stepped briskly forward toward the place where he knew the boat to be; and he was halfway across the glade when suddenly from one of the groups of men near a fire, one of them leaped up and confronted him, with his hands upon his hips, a cigar pointed at an angle in the corner of his mouth, and a leering grin upon his face.

"Where to now, my pal?" he demanded, standing in front of Nick, and thus stopping him.

Nick looked at the man, and smiled. He did not answer. He guessed instantly why Handsome had left him to find his way to the boat alone. This was doubtless one of their tricks—to see what a new recruit would do under these circumstances. Possibly, too, he thought, the woman wished to see an exhibition of his strength, and they had for that purpose pitted one of their best bullies against him.

He surveyed the fellow with a quick and comprehensive glance; and in that glance he saw that the man was a burly one, who evidently possessed great strength. But Nick did not care for that. He was only turning over in his mind in that instant what course it would be best for him to pursue. And the answer came to him when the bully repeated the question.

"Where to, pard?" he demanded again, still with the sarcastic leer on his dirty face.

"When you get back, I'll tell you!" exclaimed Nick; and at the same instant he darted a step forward and seized the man by the throat-and-hip hold of ju-jutsu, and the next instant had sent him whirling through the air as if he were a cartwheel.

He struck the ground ten feet away, and went rolling over and over among the bushes, where there happened to be a mass of cat brier, or creeping thorn; and the series of howls and curses he sent up was a wonder.

A roar of laughter from every side proved to Nick that all had been watching for the outcome of that episode; but he looked neither to the right nor the left, but strode onward toward the boat.

And then he heard a cry of warning from behind him, and he leaped aside just as the fellow he had thrown fired a bullet pointblank at him from close behind.

As it was, the missile pierced his coat sleeve inside his arm.

As Nick leaped aside he also turned.

The hobo who had fired the shot was already running toward him, and now he was endeavoring with every effort in his power to discharge the weapon again; but for some reason the mechanism of the lock refused to work, and in an instant more Nick had leaped upon him and grasped him a second time.

He was determined now that the fellow should have a lesson indeed; so while he held him at arm's length with one hand, he pummeled him with the other until his face was a mass of bruises; and then, when the yeggman was in a condition bordering upon insensibility, Nick raised him bodily from his feet, and hold

ing him in his arms, ran with him down along the path toward the water.

And reaching the edge of the swamp, he threw him out into the muddy water, headfirst.

It was not deep, but it was filled with soft ooze, which filled the ears, and eyes, and nose, and mouth of the fellow, so that, when he rose to his feet, he was sputtering and spitting, and coughing and swearing when he could.

The detective left the man to make his way out of the water to dry land as best he could, and turned coolly away to rejoin Handsome, who approached at that moment, grinning.

"Well done, Dago," he said. "You served him just right. Come along."

They entered the scow without more words, and Handsome poled it away from the shore, and along the waterway through the almost impenetrable darkness—but there was never a word said about the use of the blindfold.

"How is this?" Nick asked, after a little. "Aren't you going to tie that handkerchief over my face again?"

"No. I ought to do it, I suppose, but it's too much trouble. Besides, you're all right. I can tell a man when I see one."

"All right," said Nick. "It's your funeral; not mine. Only if the lady should raise a kick—what then?"

"She would raise a kick, too, if she knew about it," replied Handsome dubiously. "But how is she going to know it? You are not likely to tell her, and I won't."

"No," said Nick, "I won't tell her."

"Well, then we'll dispense with the handkerchief."

They poled on in silence for a time after that; but presently Nick asked:

"What's the lay to-night, Handsome?"

"I can't tell you that, Dago. You'll have to wait, and find out; and you'll have to do your own part, too; for if you flunk by so much as a hair, it's my duty to kill you."

"Which I suppose you would do, eh?"

"Sure I'd do it—why not? If you ain't what you seem to be, I'd as soon put a hole in you as dip this pole into the water. You hear me!"

"Sure thing."

"And that notwithstanding I like you. I reckon you're all right, and I'm going a great way toward proving what I think about it by not binding that handkerchief over your eyes now."

"Are there any others in this thing with us, Handsome?"

"You'll find out soon enough. The best way for you is not to ask too many questions, but to be satisfied to do as you're told."

They lapsed into silence after that, and there was no more said until after they had arrived at the bank where the scow was to be left.

"I suppose I can ask about those other guns that we left in the woods to-night, without giving offense, can't I?" asked Nick then.

"That depends on what you want to ask about 'em," was the reply; they were now hurrying in the direction of the tracks.

"I want to know if Hobo Harry is going to send for them?"

"Didn't you hear her say so?" was the rejoinder; and then, when Nick laughed softly, Handsome turned on him with fury, and would have seized him had he not suddenly recalled the fact that his own strength was no match for that of the man beside him.

But his anger disappeared as quickly as it came, and he joined in the laugh.

"I gave it away that time, didn't I?" he said. "You were too cute for me, Dago. But it is dangerous knowledge, Dago. I'll tell you that."

"You didn't give it away," replied Nick. "Any fool would have known that the woman was Hobo Harry."

"Then there are a lot of fools in the outfit. You're wrong, Dago. Lots of 'em don't suspect it. They think only that she is Hobo Harry's wife, or sister, or sweetheart, or something like that. There isn't half a dozen of us who really know for certain that Black Madge is Hobo Harry. And there! I've let the cat out of the bag again. But you're all right. It won't do no harm to tell you."

"Not a mite," replied Nick; but he chuckled noiselessly all the same. That last admission made by Handsome was worth hearing.

"Black Madge, eh?" he was thinking to himself. "Now I know why it was that there was something so strikingly familiar about the woman. Black Madge, eh? Well, well, who would have supposed that?"

For Black Madge was a character well known in the criminal world, and to the police, although very little was known about her really. There was a picture in the Rogues' Gallery in New York that purported to be of her; but Nick knew now that it was not.

Nevertheless, he remembered that once upon a time he had seen Black Madge, who was the daughter of a Frenchwoman by an Italian father; Black Madge, who had already made an unenviable record for herself on both sides of the ocean.

It was a long time before that when Nick Carter saw her. She was only a grown-up child at that time, but she was already a hardened criminal, nevertheless;

and he recalled now the circumstance of his meeting with her.

It was in Paris. He had gone to the prefecture of police to see the chief of the secret service, who was awaiting him, and had found the girl in the room with the chief, who was engaged in questioning her closely in reference to a crime that had been committed, and because it was thought that she knew the parties concerned. But she had given no information, and had been allowed to go; and after her departure the chief had said to Nick:

"Monsieur Carter, some day that young woman will appear on your side of the water. I hope you thought to take a good look at her face."

"I did," replied the detective.

"Remember it, for some day you will have cause to do so, I do not doubt. She is a terror, and she has brains. The worst kind of a criminal. She should have been a man, for she has a man's daring, a man's recklessness, and a man's way of doing things. Black Madge, we call her here."

Nick recalled all that conversation now, plunged into a reverie about it by Handsome's use of the name. All the time he had been in the room with her in that house in the swamp, he had felt that he ought to remember where he had seen those eyes before. Now, he counted the years that had passed since he saw her, and, to his astonishment, they were five.

"She was seventeen then, the chief told me," he thought, "that would make her twenty-two by now."

And then it came back to him how strangely she had looked at him while he was leaving her presence, and he wondered if her recollection for faces was as good or even better than his own.

"But," he argued, "it could not be possible that she would remember me from that one short glance she must have had of me at that time. And, besides, I was not disguised at all, and now I look no more like myself than—well, than she does."

"What the devil are you so silent about?" demanded Handsome. They had reached the fence at the railroad track, and Handsome was leaning against it.

"I was trying to figure out in my mind what sort of a lay we are on to-night," replied Nick. "I'm not used to starting out without knowing where I am going. I feel like a horse—with you for a driver."

"Well"—Handsome laughed—"I won't use the whip unless you get skittish."

"What are we waiting here for?"

"We are waiting for our chauffeur with the automobile," grinned Handsome. "Nice road for an auto, isn't it?—bumping over those ties."

"Hark!" said Nick.

"I'm harking, my gun."

"It does sound like an automobile, sure enough," said Nick.

"Didn't I tell you that we are waiting for one. Come on."

He leaped the fence, and Nick followed him over; then they climbed the grade, and paused beside the track.

And then, while they stood there, and the droning sound peculiar to automobiles came momentarily nearer and nearer, the detective began thoroughly to realize for the fist time that something really serious was afoot for the night.

But he was not long left in doubt as to the character of the approaching vehicle, for in a moment more it swept around a curve in the railroad, and came to a stop immediately in front of them.

And, strangely enough, it was an automobile arrangement, only that it was equipped with car wheels instead of with rubber tires; wheels that had flanges to fit the tracks. But it was provided with a gasoline engine, and Nick knew from the appearance of the apparatus that it was capable of great speed.

When it came to a stop Nick saw that it already contained two men, one of whom was driving; but he got down from the seat under the steering wheel, and climbed into the rear of the machine, while Handsome took his place.

"New man; Dago for a handle," said Handsome briefly, by way of introducing Nick to the others.

What their names might be he evidently did not deem it important to mention.

"Try-out?" asked one of the men, while Nick was climbing into the box of the machine.

Handsome nodded curtly—and that was all that was said at the moment.

It was significant, however, to Nick, for it meant a lot. It meant that these other men entirely comprehended the situation, and that all three of them were prepared to shoot him in the back at any moment when his conduct of the business in hand did not entirely satisfy them.

But Nick was resolved not to be shot in the back that night. Whatever the business might prove to be upon which they were engaged, he was resolved to see it through to a finish, even to the extent of helping them burglarize a bank, if that was the lay.

"To do a great right, do a little wrong," he muttered to himself. Whatever might be stolen or whatever damage might be done that night, he would charge up in his expenses, and see to it that the railroad people made it good later on, when his work should be done.

In the meantime the railroad automobile had been gathering speed, and now it seemed to Nick to be little less than wonderful that it remained on the tracks at all, for if he was any judge of speed, he knew that they must be flying along at much more than a mile a minute—and he wondered what would happen if the headlight of a locomotive should loom suddenly before them—and then, just as the thought occurred to him, they rounded a short curve, and came to a sudden stop.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER ROBS A BANK.

The instant the strange machine was brought to a stop—and it was done wonderfully soon, considering the speed at which they had been traveling—the three men leaped to the ground beside the track, and Nick was ordered to follow them.

He did so, and then he was told to bear a hand; and, following directions that were given him, he seized hold of the boxlike tonneau.

Almost in a twinkling of time after that the machine was lifted from the track in sections, and finally, still in sections, was carried to a highway near at hand, where it was put together again, minus the iron wheels. But there were other wheels concealed in that commodious body, and these were quickly taken out and adjusted.

Within twenty minutes of the time when they came to a stop on the track, after rounding the curve, the machine was fitted with regular automobile wheels, and was ready to proceed along the highway.

Nick saw in this arrangement much that had puzzled other men who had been on the job. He had no doubt from what he knew of automobiles that this machine was capable of sixty miles an hour, or even more than that, on the highway; and, if that was true, it, of course, could make a half greater speed than that on rails.

But he made no comment. That was not expected of him, and would have been resented had he attempted to do so; but he climbed to his place when he was told, and again they sped away toward some destination, the nature of which he did not know.

Once he ventured to ask the man nearest him what time it was, and received a curt "Shut up!" by way of reply; so he remained silent after that.

And after a while—less than half an hour—they drove into a village, and presently ran the machine around behind a church, where it was placed in one of the stalls of a shed.

And still his three companions worked in utter silence. Beyond now and then a curt word uttered by Handsome, who seemed to be in command of the expedition, nothing at all was said.

Nevertheless, each man there seemed to know exactly what to do; as if every move they made had been nicely planned out for them—and such Nick believed to be the case.

When the machine was stored away, the men fell into line, Nick being shoved into position directly behind Handsome, and then, in Indian file, they moved silently forward toward a high fence that was near at hand.

They went over this one by one, Handsome waiting with patience until the last one was over, and then the march was taken up again.

They passed now through the rear of a large yard, and before them loomed a brick building, which Nick figured must be a courthouse; and after a moment they made a half circuit around, and came to a stop between two buildings of brick, one of them being that one already mentioned.

The night was dark now, for the moon had gone down, and there were no street lamps in that village evidently; or, if there were, they were not burned on nights when there was supposed to be a moon.

But there was light enough for Nick to discover that they were close to the main street of the village; he could see the store windows on the opposite side; and it suddenly came to him that the building that was

next to them—the second one—was a bank, and that they were about to rob it.

He knew now what was expected of him; and again he determined to see the thing through to the end.

It was not to prevent one robbery that he was engaged; but to prevent many. It was not to apprehend the participants in a minor job like this one promised to be, but to capture the head that directed many such robberies, and so stop them altogether.

And still no word—not even a whisper—was spoken between the men. They worked on in utter silence, as if their plans had been thoroughly conned until they were learned absolutely by heart.

Nor did they pause in the yard next to the bank. There was scarcely a halt there; but they passed to the rear of the building, and followed one another over the high fence that was there, to the rear of the bank building.

Keeping themselves well in the shadows, they crept forward silently to a rear door of the building, and here Handsome paused for a moment, and put down a canvas bag that he had been carrying all the way; and now he whispered in Nick's ear:

"There are the tools, Dago. Let's see what kind of a cracksman you are."

Nick did not need a second bidding. Having determined upon his course, he did not hesitate, but he seized the bag, pulled open the mouth of it, and, having selected such tools as he wanted, he applied himself to the task that had been set for him.

A professional burglar of long experience could not have gotten that huge oak door open more quickly and silently than Nick Carter did, and Handsome gave him an approving pat on the shoulder.

He was the first to enter the bank, Nick following, and the others coming behind them; and presently, after forcing another door, they stood crouching inside the bank itself.

A dim light burned in a gas jet in the centre of the large room, which was divided only by the wire screen which separated the customers' side of the rail from the clerks; and almost beneath the light, exactly where it could shine full upon the steel doors, was the huge safe of the institution.

A person might not stand in front of that safe for a moment without being in full view from the street should any one happen to pass there. Nick saw that at a glance; but nevertheless Handsome silently placed a drill and a bottle of liquid in his hand, and motioned that he was to begin the dangerous part of the work.

"Didn't you bring a screen with you, you chump?" demanded Nick, in a whisper. "If you had told me what the lay was, I'd have made one."

Handsome nodded, evidently well pleased; and at the same time he produced a roll from under his coat, and gave it to the detective. Nick unrolled it, and found that it was merely a piece of burlap, rather more than a yard long, and about two feet in width, and with a roll of cord attached to each corner of it.

He knew what that was intended for readily enough, and, taking it in his hands, he crept forward without another word, and quickly attached the four strings to objects which he selected as being situated about right for his purposes.

In two minutes the screen was in place, and it afforded a perfect shelter from view from the street, and just the sort of one that would never be noticedf rom the outside at all, unless a person stopped at the window and deliberately peered inside—and that nobody was likely to do, unless something else first attracted attention.

In fixing the screen in place so quickly and perfectly, Nick evidently won over not only Handsome, but the others; and now there was no more question of his doing the drilling alone. Each man took his own part of the work in silence, as if Nick had always been one of them; and, besides, now there was no time to be lost.

Drilling through the steel doors of a safe is not an easy task, and it is not done quickly, although expert burglars carry tools these days which will cut anything.

They took their turns at the drill, as they took them also with the acids and oil; and the work went on merrily until the holes were ready for the charges.

And here again it seemed that Handsome was determined to try Nick out to the last, for he bent forward and whispered in his ear:

"Prove one thing more, Dago, and you're made."

"Want me to do the blowing?" asked Nick.

Handsome nodded.

"All right," said Nick. "Light out, then."

"But——"

"Get out, I say. If I do the blowing I'm boss for the time being. Git!"

They did; and again, with the implements and the explosives at hand, Nick went to work; and, as before he worked rapidly and well—as if he were an experienced hand at that sort of employment.

And then, when the charge was ready, Nick pulled up the heavy rope matting from the floor, and after doubling it again and again until there was a huge wad of it, he braced it with desks and chairs against the front of the safe; and when all that was done to his satisfaction, he lighted the

fuse, and ran back to the rear hallway, where the others were watching and waiting.

They had not long to wait after that. There was a lapse of perhaps a minute and a half, and then a dull, booming roar shook the building, and the burglars rushed forward.

Now was the time when they were compelled to work rapidly, if ever.

It was true that Nick had so muffled the sound of the explosion that it was hardly possible that the noise of it had roused anybody at all; but there was always a chance of somebody near at hand being wakeful or watchful.

At any moment they might be interrupted—and no burglar likes to be interrupted. It always means a fight, in which somebody is likely to get killed, and burglars rarely do any killing unless they have to in order to escape.

They rushed forward together; but now Nick purposely kept in the background. He had no idea of being taken himself if they should be interrupted; nor did he wish to give his companions an opportunity to kill any person who might interrupt them. It was all right from his standpoint to participate in the burglary, in order that he might ultimately catch all the thieves; but he did not wish to be a party to any fight that might come of it.

But he was made to hold one of the bags while Handsome filled it from the inside of the safe.

They pried open the inner compartments, and threw them indiscriminately upon the floor as soon as they were emptied; they jimmied open the steel boxes as readily as if they had been made of softest pine—and in twenty minutes after the explosion they were stealthily climbing the fence again, into the courthouse yard.

And, so far as they could see, not a soul in the village had been awakened or alarmed.

They returned to the shed, where they had left the automobile, by the same route they had covered in approaching the bank; the machine was backed out; they entered it, turned on the power, and sped away through the silent streets as they had come, with nobody the wiser for what they had done, the havoc they had wrought, and the wealth they had stolen.

Down beside the road where they had made the change before, from the track of the railway to the highway, they paused long enough to secure the iron wheels, and here the change was made back to a railway machine. The car was lifted in sections to the tracks, and with everything adjusted they were soon flying down the shining rails at a frightful rate of speed, and in silence—for it seemed to be a rule among these men that there should be no talking.

Mile after mile they covered in this way, and then the machine was slowed down, and came to a stop at the point where it had picked up Handsome and Nick at first, and here they got down, and, having taken out the plunder, stood beside the track until the machine had disappeared from view.

"Now, Dago, help me with the swag," said Handsome; and together they picked it up, and once more started for the outlaws' retreat in the middle of the impassable swamp.

When they were in the boat, and almost ready to land where Nick had thrown the man into the water, Handsome turned to him, and whispered:

"You're all right, Dago. I'll tell Madge so, too!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE'S PREDICAMENT.

When Nick Carter was shown a place to sleep that night—or, rather, that morning, for it was well toward daylight by the time Handsome and he returned to the outlaws' camp—he tumbled upon the bunk that was shown him, and he lost no time in doing so; nor did he open his eyes again until he felt a hand shaking him lustily, and a voice crying out to him:

"Wake up, Dago! You're wanted!"

He sprang up instantly; and, because he had laid himself down with nearly all his clothing still upon his person, he was not long in making himself ready. To have insulted the profession he had adopted by washing his face was not to be thought of.

"Gee! But I'm hungry!" he said to Handsome, who was standing near, waiting for him.

"Madge will give you something to eat. She is at her breakfast now," was the whispered reply. "She wants you."

"Then," said Nick, "if I am going into the presence of a lady, and am expected to eat with her, I'll have to wash my face and hands. Show me where."

Handsome laughed.

"I do it myself once in a while," he said. "Come with me."

And he led Nick to a place along a path through the swamp where he succeeded in giving himself a good wash—for Nick had the satisfaction

of knowing that the stain he had used was of such a quality that it would defy water. Alcohol alone would remove it.

They found Madge on the doorstep, awaiting them; but Handsome paused at the edge of the clearing, and muttered:

"I leave you here, Dago. I'm not in this. You're to have this interview alone."

"All right," replied the detective, and was about to move on, when Handsome detained him by a gesture.

"Put in a good word for me, Dago, if you get the chance," he whispered. "I have already said many a good one for you—and I made it as easy for you as I could all around."

"All right," said Nick again.

"And one more word, Dago. I forgot to tell you——"

"What?"

"Cremation Mike has got it in——"

"Who?"

"Cremation Mike—he worked in a crematory once—has got it in for you. He's the chap you chucked into the soup, you know. He sneaked away after you left last night, so I'm told, and he swore black and blue that he would have your life for that act. He will, too. He's sure bad medicine, that fellow. He's a bad member, too. I just thought I'd give you the pointer."

Handsome turned away then, and Nick went on alone to the piazza, where Black Madge was awaiting him.

He stopped just before he put his foot upon the veranda, and waited for her to make some sign; and she approached quite near to him, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Good morning, Dago," she said, smiling.

"Good morning, madam," he replied gravely.

"You look quite like a gentleman this morning," she continued, laughing lightly. "Or, no, rather like a mountain bandit of Italy."

"I could be either if I chose," he replied again, as gravely as he had spoken before.

"I do not doubt it. I have been giving you considerable thought since I talked with you here last night. Come inside. You haven't had your breakfast, I suppose?"

"No, madam."

"Then you shall breakfast with me. I was about to eat mine when I remembered you, and sent for you."

"Madam is most kind."

She led the way into the house, where a table was spread with good things, well cooked, too, they appeared to be; and she pointed toward a chair at the opposite side of the table.

"Sit there," she said. "I declare, we are quite domestic."

"So it would appear, madam. I am afraid that you are doing me too much honor, for one who has been so short a time among you."

"Bah! I am glad to have somebody who can talk decently near me. I tire of all these ragamuffins who are my men. Sometimes I kill one of them just for the mere fun of ridding myself of the vermin."

"Madam is incautious, perhaps."

"Why so?"

"Some day one of them might take it into his head to kill madam."

"Then somebody will have to be mighty quick about it. I'm not so easily killed as all that. Tell me—have you guessed who I am?"

"I am not a good guesser, madam."

"On the contrary, I should suppose you to be a good one—an exceptionally good one. Answer me: Have you guessed who I am?"

"I might make a guess now, madam."

"Oh, drop that madam. I don't want you to madam me all the time. Who do you suppose I am?"

"If I am to make a guess, I should suppose that you are that distinguished and elusive person whom the outside world refers to as Hobo Harry."

She laughed long and heartily, stirring her coffee vigorously the while.

"Upon my word, you are a good one," she said, still with laughter in her voice. "Yes, I am that distinguished and elusive person. There is no doubt about that. I have spent a long time in bringing this organization to perfection, Dago. What do you think of it?"

"I think it is a wonder."

"Right you are, my man! It is a wonder. For example, what did you think of the operation that was performed last night?"

"I thought it was carried out very perfectly. The men must have been a long time in laying their plans."

She laughed again.

"Not one of those men—not even Handsome—had ever seen that place before. They only obeyed my orders; nothing more. I made the plans

myself. I told them exactly what to do, and when, and how to do it. It is all a question of mathematics, and of obeying orders."

"It was perfectly done, madam."

"There you go again. By the way, Handsome gives me an excellent report of you."

"I had supposed as much, else I would not be here breakfasting with you."

"That is not why I sent for you; that has nothing to do with last night."

"No?"

"I want you to tell me where I have seen you before—and where you have met me before," she said swiftly, and with a sudden and dangerous narrowing of her eyes.

If Nick had not had himself perfectly in hand he must have given a start then that would have betrayed him; as it was, he answered instantly, and as if the subject had also occurred to him:

"For the life of me, madam, I cannot remember. I have tried to recall the time and place ever since I saw you last night; but it eludes me. I cannot tell."

"It is well that you have answered as you have," she said, with a threatening cadence in her voice.

"Why so, madam?"

"Because I saw plainly in your eyes last night that you remembered to have seen me somewhere before that time. Had you denied it, you would have lied to me; and it is not healthy for people to tell me lies."

"I can imagine that, madam. But since I have no reason to do so——"

"Tell me what there is about me that is familiar to you, Dago."

"It must be your great beauty that I remem——"

"That will be about enough of that, thank you," she interrupted him coldly. "I know all about my beauty, and don't in the least need to be told about it."

"One could not very well remember you at all without remembering your beauty," insisted Nick boldly. "It is the first thing about you that strikes one; and the second is——"

"Well—what? Possibly I will be more interested in that."

"The fear you inspire, I think. You have what the French call a 'way' about you."

She started perceptibly.

"What do you know about the French?" she demanded; and Nick saw instantly that he had made a mistake in reminding her of her career in Paris. Now it was possible that she might recall where she had seen him.

But he dismissed the idea as soon as it came to him, for he remembered again how perfectly he was disguised, and how impossible it should be for her to remember him after all these years, through the disguise.

But now she was looking steadily at him, and for the moment she had forgotten to eat.

"Who are you, Dago?" she demanded suddenly. "You are not what you seem."

"Few of us are," returned the detective evasively.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you, madam, as much as it is possible to tell. You do not demand the past records of your followers. All that you insist upon is that they shall be faithful in the future."

"Who are you?" she repeated again.

"I am Dago John, madam, at your service."

"But you have another name than Dago John."

"I had another—once."

"What was it?"

"Madam does not suppose, when she asks the question, that it will be answered, does she?" Nick inquired boldly.

"By Heaven, sir, do you dare to defy me?"

"Not at all. I merely feel sure that madam asked the question as a joke, knowing that it could not be answered."

For a moment it seemed as if she did not know whether to be angry at him for his cool effrontery, or to laugh the matter off entirely, in admiration of his bravery. She decided upon the latter course evidently, for she did laugh—in a way that was not quite pleasant to hear, however; and she said:

"Try to think where you have seen me before. Help me to remember. I want to recall it."

"It is impossible, madam. I have already tried."

"Is the memory that is associated with me pleasant or otherwise?"

"It could not be but pleasant, since it was—you,"

he ventured; and she frowned. It was plain that she did not relish such compliments.

And now she sat with her eyes fixed upon him, idly stirring her second cup of coffee, and seeming to look him through and through, while she

cast her memory back over the storms of her life, not yet more than twenty-three years, all told, and attempted with all her strength of will to call up for recognition the ghost which his appearance had conjured.

After a little she leaned forward, nearer to him, and her eyes, coal black, and blazing, fairly burned into his own; but he held his gaze steadily upon her, never once flinching from the scrutiny.

And then, so suddenly that it startled him, she leaped to her feet, knocking her coffee to the floor, and she stood over him—but whether in anger or only in astonishment that she had remembered, he could not have told.

"By all the gods!" she cried out. "I remember you now. It is your eyes that have haunted me, and now I remember where I have seen them. I remember. It was in Paris. It was at the prefecture of police. I was there. I was only a girl. I had just finished with the chief when you entered the room. I did not notice your name when it was announced, but now I remember you—at the prefecture of police in Paris! Tell me—tell me, I say, what you were doing there!"

The detective knew that it would be folly to deny the charge that she made. He knew that she remembered now, perfectly well, and that nothing could disabuse her mind of the determination it had reached.

Acting upon the impulse of the instant, therefore, and determined now to play out his rôle as it should appear, Nick pretended instantly to be as greatly astonished as she was at the recollection, and the strangeness of it.

He, too, leaped to his feet, imitating an astonishment as great as her own. He did not tip over his coffee, but he did manage to upset his chair, so that it fell backward on the floor; and then for the space of a moment they stood staring into each other's eyes, both—from all appearances—speechless with astonishment.

And then, very slowly, she subsided into her chair again, still keeping her eyes upon him, and still evidently taxing her memory to the utmost to recall all the incidents of that meeting at the prefecture in Paris.

"I remember now," she murmured at last, more to herself than to him. "It all comes back to me, bit by bit. Monsieur Goron was chief at the time—no? Yes. I remember. There had been a sudden death in the house where I lived—it was on the floor just beneath me—and Goron sent for me to question me about it. It was thought at first that Lucie had been murdered, and Goron thought that perhaps I would know about it. He had just finished questioning me when you entered the room—ah!"

Her eyes blazed with a sudden fire of anger, and her lips tightened over her teeth.

"When you entered the room Goron rose and shook hands with you. Why did he do that? Goron did not shake hands with criminals!"

"Nor with his police spies, did he?" asked Nick, smiling and shrugging his shoulders.

"But why did he shake hands with you?"

"Because we were old acquaintances, madam."

"And he called you by name. What was that name?"

"Madam, for some time past I have deemed it best to forget it."

"Nevertheless you shall remember it now."

Nick shrugged his shoulders, and did not reply.

"What was that name?" she demanded again.

"I have told madam that I——"

She started from her chair, and ran across the room so suddenly that Nick was interrupted in what he was about to say; and she seized a rope that hung from the ceiling and stood with her hand upon it, grasping it.

"If I pull this rope," she said coldly, "as many of my followers as hear it will rush to this place. You know what is likely to happen then if I loose them upon you. They are all like wild beasts, or like dogs, ready to tear each other at the slightest provocation. If I should point my finger at you —so—and say to them, 'Take him; he is yours,' your life would not be worth as much as the dregs in your coffee cup. Tell me, what that name was, or I will summon the men."

The detective shrugged his shoulders, and leaned back in his chair, smiling.

"It would be a foolish and a useless proceeding," he said calmly. "I should not tell them that name any more than I tell it to you. I will not tell it. It is of no moment here. It could do you no good to hear it, and to mention it might do me harm; therefore, I shall not mention it, no matter how often you order me to do so. It pains me to disobey you, madam, but you force me into the alternative, and I have no choice. Pull the rope if you will."

Instead of pulling it, she released it, still staring at him, and she returned slowly to her chair.

"You are a strange man," she murmured, "and a brave one. There is not another who would dare to defy me as you have done."

"Perhaps there is not another who has so much at stake," he replied quietly, but with perfect truth, as the reader knows.

Again she knit her brows in perplexity; again the detective knew that she was concentrating her mind upon that incident at the prefecture, trying with all her power to recall the merest detail of it.

Nick remembered that his name had been mentioned aloud at that time; he recalled the fact that Goron, in rising to shake hands with him, had called him by name plainly enough. It was evident that she also remembered that much of the facts, and was now straining every energy she possessed to recall what that name was.

And while she thought so deeply, her face gradually assumed an expressionless cast. She closed her lips firmly together. Her eyes became sombre. She seemed oblivious of his presence, and of her surroundings. For the moment she was back again in Paris, at the prefecture, in the presence of Goron, five years ago.

After a little, without another change of expression, she shrugged her shoulders, and rose from her chair, and then, with an assumption of carelessness, she passed from the room upon the piazza, saying as she went:

"Come. We will not bother any more about this for the present. We will take up the subject again another time, after we have both had opportunity to think it over. If you care for a cigar, Dago, there are some in that cupboard yonder. Help yourself."

Now, it happened that Nick did care for a cigar. He had not had one in many a day, but had forced himself to be content with an old pipe. The prospect of a cigar was enticing, and so he took her at her word, and helped himself—turning his back to her as he did so, and so he did not see the strange smile which crossed her face as she passed through the door upon the piazza.

He was a bit puzzled by this sudden change in her attitude and manner. He could not exactly account for it. Had she remembered? He could not tell.

He realized, however, that he was in a predicament—that his position was precarious; for if she should remember—if she should recall the name of Nick Carter as connected with that incident, he knew that his

own life would not be worth the snap of a finger, no matter how bravely he might fight, or how many of the foe he should overcome in the contest that would inevitably follow.

For, scattered about in that stronghold in the swamp, there were no less than a hundred of her followers, and there was not one among them who would not kill at her bidding.

She was standing upon the piazza, looking away through the woods, when he came out, and, without turning her head, she said to him:

"Take that chair, and remain there until you have smoked your cigar. The men might take it into their heads to be jealous if you should go among them with it, and they should know that you, a new arrival, had breakfasted with me. I will return in a moment."

She left him then, entering the house; and with no thought of immediate danger in his mind, Nick followed her suggestion, and leaned back in the chair, tilting it against the house, determined to enjoy that smoke to the utmost.

After that it was difficult to tell exactly what did happen.

He remembered afterward that he smoked on in enjoyment of the cigar for some minutes, and that he thought it somewhat rank, notwithstanding the fact that it had the appearance of being of excellent quality.

And then suddenly the cigar flashed, exactly as if there had been three or four grains of gunpowder wrapped in it—and he was instantly conscious of an intensely bitter taste in his mouth.

And then it seemed to him almost as if somebody had struck him, so strange were his sensations—and from that instant memory left him entirely.

The woman had been watching him narrowly from the doorway; she was waiting for that flash from the end of his cigar, and when it came she

passed out through the door swiftly, and caught him as he was about to fall from his chair to the floor of the piazza; caught him, and held him, and then deftly raised him to his feet, and half carried him inside the house before anybody—had a person been observant of the scene—could have realized that anything was wrong.

She possessed great strength, this remarkable woman; for the instant she was inside the door, heavy as he was, she raised him in her arms, and carried him into an adjoining room, where she closed the door behind her, and deposited him upon a couch.

And then, still working with great rapidity, she pulled aside a rug that was on the floor, and, having lifted a trapdoor, she again took him in her arms, and descended through the opening in the floor to the depths beneath it.

After a little she reappeared, and this time there was a grim smile upon her face, while she replaced the rug over the trapdoor, and otherwise rendered the room the same as it had been before the incident happened.

She passed coolly out upon the piazza, and for a time strode up and down it in deep thought; but at last she raised her head quickly, and called sharply to the sentinel who was pacing up and down in front of the cottage.

"Send Handsome to me!" she ordered; and then she continued her pacing until Handsome appeared.

Handsome belied his name terribly in the light of day, for an uglier-looking chap could not be imagined; and yet, withal, there was a gleam of humor in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth. She turned to him abruptly.

"Where are the others of that bunch who were found with Dago?" she asked sharply.

"Yonder," replied Handsome, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the glade beyond them.

"What do you think about them, Handsome?" she asked again.

"I haven't thought much about them," he replied. "They are about the usual sort, I believe; no better and perhaps no worse."

"I am not so sure of that."

"No?" he asked, vaguely surprised.

"Handsome, I want you to take them, one by one, to the pool in the woods, strip them, and scrub them with soap, and water, and sand, if necessary. I want you to make sure that there is no suggestion of disguise about any of the three. Do it at once—and when it is done, no matter whether there is a question of disguise about any of them or not, bring them to me."

Handsome departed without a word. It was plain that Black Madge was accustomed to obedience. It was plain also that her suspicions were thoroughly aroused; for now she paced up and down again restlessly, and continued so to pace until almost an hour later Handsome stood before her again.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Two of them were plainly disguised," he replied.

"And the other?" she demanded, frowning.

"The other, as plainly was not disguised."

"And the two who were disguised—what of them?"

"I cannot tell if they are known to each other.

I cannot tell whether they are spies or not, only it is quite likely that they are."

"And the third one? The one who wore no disguise?"

"I think he is all right. He is the one called Pat. When he realized that the others who had been with him were in disguise, he flew at one of them, thinking that he had been followed himself, and I think would have killed the fellow if I had not been there to prevent it."

Madge listened, with a shrug of her shoulders; then she said briefly:

"Bring them here, Handsome. Bring the two who were disguised, first. Leave the other one alone until I send for him. What are the supposed names of these two?"

"One is called Tenstrike, and the other calls himself the Chicago Chicken."

"The Chicago Chicken," she said slowly. "Chick, for short, is it not? I think we are on the right track, Handsome. Bring that one here alone—first."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DETECTIVES FACE A CRISIS.

Chick had committed the folly of not being entirely thorough in the creation of his disguise; so also had Ten-Ichi; and the soap and scrubbing brushes, as employed by Handsome, had done the work of removing it.

But Patsy? Well, it had not been necessary for Patsy to be quite so thorough, for his own particular person and features were sufficient disguise, with a few minor alterations and additions.

For instance, at the risk of not having it wear off soon enough to suit his purposes, he had gone to a professional hair dyer, and had ordered his shock of hair indelibly dyed to a dirty brick-red; and he had put spots on his face, and the back of his hands, with nitrate of silver, so that the spots burned into the skin. No soap and water could remove these. They would only disappear with time; but Patsy had never traveled on a reputation for beauty, and he did not give the matter a thought beyond the immediate necessities.

He had taken another precaution, also, just before he entered the woods to go to the place of meeting. He had stripped himself in a secluded place near the railway tracks, and he had rolled himself in the coal dust around the track, griming the dirt into his body, so that when it came to the time that Handsome stripped him—well, it can be imagined how he looked.

A little snuff rubbed thoroughly against his teeth had rendered them sufficiently discolored, and altogether he so thoroughly looked his part

that Handsome, when he stripped him, had not the slightest doubt of his reality.

But the frauds connected with Chick and Ten-Ichi were easily detected.

Black Madge, while still seated at the table with the detective, had suddenly recalled the name that had long ago been mentioned in her presence by the chief of the Paris police. It had come to her in a flash that the name was Nick Carter—and that this man who was so calmly seated in her presence was Nick Carter.

Madge knew a great deal more about Nick Carter than Nick supposed she did; she knew all about his household, and about his assistants. She knew their names as well as if they were followers of her own—and when Handsome, in mentioning the names of the other men, had talked about Tenstrike and the Chicken, she had connected the names at once.

As for the other one—Pat—that had a significance also; but Pat is a very common name, and she did not do herself the honor to suppose that Nick Carter would bring all three of his assistants into the woods with him in search of her. One, she thought, would have to be left behind to look after the business, and, therefore, she was all the more ready to believe that Patsy, since he was not in disguise, was one of her own kind, who had inadvertently fallen into the company of the detectives.

Handsome and four other men accompanied Chick to the cottage, and when he stood before Madge she looked him over from head to foot with cold scorn.

"So," she said venomously, "you thought to deceive me, did you—you and your master?"

Chick made no reply, and, after a moment, she went on:

"We have a way of ridding ourselves of such men as you are, when they come among us. It is not pleasant for them, but it serves as a lesson to

others. Step inside the house. Take him inside, Handsome. Let the others wait out here, and if there is the slightest sound of a row inside the house let them enter it at once."

When the three were in the room together, she said to Chick:

"You observe that I know who you are?"

Chick nodded—and he also smiled.

She stamped her foot upon the floor under her, and continued:

"Down there, beneath us, unconscious and chained to the wall, is Nick Carter. Even Handsome did not know that till now. He did not know that Dago John, who went with him last night to rob the bank, was no other than Nick Carter. But it is true, Handsome."

"Gee!" breathed Handsome, his fingers twitching.

"He is all right now, Handsome. He cannot hurt you. I have put him out of business—and I don't think we had better let the men know that Nick Carter has been among them. Let them wreak their vengeance upon this fellow, and upon the other—that little Jap. As for Nick Carter himself, I will take care of him. He will never come out of that cellar alive. And now, Chick, I want you to answer me a question."

"You will save your breath if you do not ask it," replied Chick. "I am not answering questions just at present."

"Not to save yourself, or your master?"

"I know very well that nothing that I can say will have the least effect upon my fate, or upon Nick Carter's," he replied.

"Very good," she replied slowly; and then to Handsome: "Take him away, Handsome. Take him out there to the men. Tell them who he is, and that they may do as they please with him. I think the quicksand bog

would be as good a place as any for him; or the fire tree; but they may do as they please—so long as they kill him. Take him away."

Chick, realizing that it was all up with him, and that he might as well make a fight for it, leaped forward quickly, full at the woman, intending to seize upon her, and hold her as a shield; but even as he attempted to do so, the floor beneath him sank under him for the depth of two feet, and before he could recover his balance, Madge had thrown a table cover over his head, and in another moment Handsome had thrown him to the floor, and called the others to his assistance.

And so Chick was tightly bound and borne away a captive—to what fate he could only imagine.

"You need not bring the Jap here at all," Madge called after them. "Let my hoboes take him with them, along with this one; but do you bring the man Pat to me at once."

And five minutes later Handsome reappeared with Patsy in tow, only that Patsy was not a prisoner—as yet.

"Now, my man," said Madge coldly, "you will have to give a pretty straight account of yourself. You were found in bad company."

"Sure, ma'am, don't I know the same? I've been apologizing to meself ever since I discovered it, an' if Handsome here had only left me alone, faith, I'd have settled wan part of me misgivings then and there, so I would. I had me doubts about the bunch from the beginning, ma'am, when they came a-sneakin' up to me fire, and eatin' of me grub; and when that other gazabo dropped from the trees, sure, I was certain of it. I was after kapin' me eyes peeled all the time since then, your worship, but I thought it wasn't f'r the likes of me to be after makin' suggestions to y'r majesty, at all, at all."

"Who are you, and what are you, Pat?" she asked, smiling upon him.

"Sure, ma'am, it's nobody I am. I've never done anything worse than pick a pocket untel a short time ago, when I had the misfortune to get mixed up in a bit av a scrap—and the other feller didn't have the common dacency to get on his feet ag'in when it was over. He jest stayed there, so he did, and thinkin' that somebody would be axin' questions of me, I lit out. Ye wouldn't know a thing more about me if I should talk for a week—but, sure, if there's a question ye'd like to ax me, I'll be afther answerin' it to the best of me ability, so I will."

"What brought you to me?"

"Me legs—no less; begging y'r pardon for mentionin' it. They weren't purty to look at when Handsome stripped me—but we needn't mention that, aither."

"But you came here in search of Hobo Harry."

"I did. That same."

"Who sent you here to find him?"

"Nobody. I had to go somewhere. I had been

readin' the papers, and I had seen a lot about Hobo Harry in 'em. All of the papers said that he was to be found around here somewhere, and that the divil himself couldn't catch him; and I says to mesilf, says I, sure that's the broth av a boy ye want to find, Pat—and here I am, ma'am."

"Did you ever hear of Nick Carter?"

"I have that."

"Ever see him?"

"I did that."

"Would you know him, do you think, if you should see him again?"

"I would that. It isn't three weeks since I saw him wid these two eyes as plain as I see y'r own beautiful face this minit. Sure, I'd know him."

"Come this way, then."

She went into the adjoining room, and they followed. There she pulled aside the rug again, and, having raised the trapdoor, descended, Patsy and Handsome following close behind her.

The narrow steps took them into a spacious cellar, and, having passed through a partition by opening a heavy oaken door, they entered what appeared to be a prison room.

Nick Carter was there. He had recovered consciousness, and was seated on a low stool against the wall. His arms were stretched wide apart, and each was held in position by an iron chain on either side of him. A ring of these chains had been passed around each wrist, and locked there, and the chains were fastened to the stone walls by staples.

Madge stopped directly in front of the detective, and glared at him, while he returned her fierce look with a half smile—for he had entirely recovered from the effects of the dose she had administered.

She raised her arm and pointed toward the detective, but before she could utter a word, Patsy cried out:

"That's him! That's him! Sure, ma'am, I'd know him among a thousand! He's got stain on his skin; I can see that; and he is disguised in other ways, ma'am, I can see that, too; but it's him. I'd take me oath to it, so I would."

Madge smiled, and softly rubbed her hands together.

"Carter," she said coldly, "do you know this man who recognizes you?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders in disdain, for he understood perfectly well that Patsy had some well-defined plan in his head for doing as he did; and he replied:

"I suppose he is somebody whom I have arrested at some time. It is only the worst criminals, like yourself, Madge, that I take the trouble to remember."

She turned away with a toss of her head.

"Come!" she ordered; and they followed her from the cellar room, and up the narrow stairs again, where she reclosed the trap.

"Go back, Pat, and take your place among the others," she ordered him then. "You will be watched for a long time, and at the first break you make you will be knifed, or shot. It is up to you whether you make good in this community or not. Go now."

When he had gone, she turned to Handsome.

"Handsome," she said slowly, "you can go now, too. Keep an eye on that Pat. At midnight to-night, come here to the cottage, for I want you to help me to carry the body into the woods to the quicksand pit. We will throw him there—Nick Carter, I mean."

"Of course. Shall you chuck him in alive?"

"No; for he would find some way to crawl out and escape. I will put him out of the way first. It will be only a dead body that we will have to carry, but I don't want the men to know that Nick Carter has been among us until after he is dead. Then it will not matter."

"Right you are," said Handsome; and he took his departure.

But down in the cellar beneath them something had happened, for as soon as the party of three left him, Nick calmly and easily pulled the iron staples from the wall and stood upon his feet. The fact was that he had

already succeeded in loosening them when he heard the approach of Madge and the others, and he had been afforded barely time to resume his position of helpless captivity when the door was opened and they entered.

But now he was free, save for the short chains that were still fastened to his wrists, and the plank walls that rose between him and liberty.

But the chains on each wrist were short, and the walls were only plank; and in Madge's eagerness and haste in fastening him there she had neglected—or she had not thought it necessary—to search him for his weapons.

He knew now that there was very little time to spare, and that he and his three assistants were in a bad predicament.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ESCAPE FROM THE SWAMP.

In the meantime, Patsy had been in half a dozen different kinds of a brown study. He realized that now the entire situation depended solely upon him, and that the lives of his chief, and of Chick and Ten-Ichi, rested wholly in his hands.

He stood, be it said, all alone, in the midst of a huge swamp, from which escape could only be had by means of a boat, and into which he had been conducted blindfolded. Around him were men, all ready at any instant to take his life for the merest excuse; and already the lives of his three friends were sacrificed unless he could do something—and that very speedily—to save them.

In the cellar at the cottage he had not dared to look squarely at his chief, for fear that the inclination on his own part to make some sort of signal would be too strong for him to resist; and he had known that Madge was watching every act and motion, as a cat watches a mouse.

When he left the cottage, and had gone as far as the edge of the glade, he halted, and waited there for Handsome, for he guessed that the man would be sent away directly; and when Handsome did come, Patsy said to him:

"Sure, Handsome, will ye tell me what is to be done wid the others?"

"I haven't made up my mind about that yet," replied Handsome.

"And is it left to you that it is?"

"Certainly."

"Faith, but that's fine. I wish it was left to me, so I do."

"What would you do to them, Pat?"

"I'd skin 'em, begorra!"

Handsome laughed.

"Perhaps I will give you a chance," he said. "However, it is likely that they will go into the quicksand."

"Where is that same, then?"

"Out in the swamp a bit. There is no getting out of it, and it tells no tales. Once a man is thrown into that, he sinks out of sight in a few minutes, and that is the last of him. It is our graveyard. There are about fifty in there now. The place is bottomless."

"Cheerful, isn't it? Sure, man, it's unhealthy, it is; but I'll go and have a look at it. Where is it?"

Handsome directed him how to find it, and he hastened away; but he paused before he started long enough to select a long, strong rope that he had seen near one of the cabins. This he carried with him, and disappeared among the trees.

Patsy was gone less than half an hour, but when he returned he was whistling; and then, after a little, he found an opportunity to linger around the place where Chick and Ten-Ichi were confined in one of the cabins.

And presently he began to sing; at first in a low tone, and in unintelligible words; but his voice was good, and it attracted attention, even among that motley crew, and after a little, perceiving that they were listening, he sang the louder.

If they had but known it, he was singing in Japanese, which Ten-Ichi had taught him to speak perfectly; and the words he uttered as he sang, translated, were:

"There is a quicksand pit not far from here. They are going to throw you both into it. I have carried a rope to the quicksand pit. I have tied it to a tree near there. When you are thrown into the pit, spread out your arms. And also spread out your legs. Keep as still as possible so as not to sink too fast. I will be there as soon as I can do it. I will throw you the end of the rope. And with your own combined strength and mine, we can pull you out. I am not suspected, so I can do the act, all right. Keep up your pluck, and manage not to go into the pit head down."

He sang this over and over several times until he was sure that Ten-Ichi had heard and understood, and would convey the message to Chick, and then he sauntered away.

Twice after that he tried to get near to the cottage to sing to Nick Carter; but each time he was stopped and turned back again; and at last he muttered to himself:

"I'll have to wait till to-night for that part of it. After I have rescued Chick and Ten-Ichi I will have them to help me, and then it will be funny if we don't get the chief out of the pickle he is in."

It was well toward evening, almost the hour of sundown, before Chick and Ten-Ichi were carried to the quicksand pit; and then a procession followed them. The hands and feet of the prisoners were not bound, for it was desired that they should flounder in the quicksand in order to hasten its work; and without ceremony they were hurled into the midst of it, one, and then the other.

Patsy's only fear was that the horde of hoboes would throw sticks and stones at the helpless men in the sand pit; but he found that this was against orders, since the presence of such impedimenta would give the victims something to seize hold of; and the operation of sinking was so

slow, and the hoboes had seen it so many times, that they had lost interest in it; so that almost at once after Chick and Ten-Ichi were thrown in they began to withdraw to their several occupations; and finally when only a group of four remained, Patsy, who was one of them, called out: "It's tired of this I am. Come on!" and, nothing loath, the others followed him away.

But he was not long gone. Almost at once he found an opportunity to leave them, and, by making a detour, to hurry back again.

Already when he had reached the pit a second time the two detectives had sunk almost to their armpits; but in an instant Patsy found the rope he had concealed, one end of which was fastened to a tree.

The task which followed can better be imagined than described, and only for the great strength of the trio it must have been unsuccessful. But with Chick and Ten-Ichi straining for their lives at one end, and Patsy pulling on the other as best he could, they came forth inch by inch, until at last they stood, covered with mud, to be sure, but on solid earth.

"Now, go around that way," said Patsy, speaking rapidly. "The cottage is over there, as you know. You'll have to cross a neck of the swamp in getting to it, but the chief is there, a prisoner. I have seen him. He is chained to the wall in the cellar. If you get a chance before I do, overcome that beast of a sentinel, who is walking up and down near the house. I'll go back through the glade, and I'll manage somehow to join you there, if I have to kill somebody in order to do it; and take these. They are extra ones.

I swiped them." He handed them each a pistol as he spoke.

Chance played into Patsy's hands when he returned to the glade. Two of the men had been quarreling, and they had taken the centre of the glade to settle their differences; and there a ring had formed around them—a ring which comprised almost every man of the outfit.

The point was that the attention of everybody was diverted from Patsy, and, merely bestowing a single glance upon what was taking place, he hurried silently past them—it was almost dark now—and in a moment more had passed through the pathway to the clearing around the cottage.

As he entered the clearing silently, he came directly upon the sentinel, who, after listening to the row in the glade for a moment, had just turned to retrace his steps; this made him assume a position with his back toward Patsy, and in an instant the young athlete had leaped upon his back and shoulders, and had seized him by the throat, so that he bore him to the ground in absolute silence.

And even as he did that, Chick and Ten-Ichi dashed out of the woods and helped him; and Ten-Ichi, none too gentle, now that his anger was aroused, rapped the sentinel on the head with the butt of his pistol, so that he stiffened out and offered no more resistance.

They had been thoughtful enough to bring the rope with them, too, and it did not take long to tie the man; and then the three assistants of Nick Carter leaped forward toward the door of the cottage, realizing that at any instant they might be interrupted in their work, and knowing that the odds would be terribly against them if they were.

They leaped upon the piazza—and as they did so the door opened directly in front of them, and Nick Carter appeared before them with the senseless form of Black Madge in his arms.

For just one instant he started backward; and then he recognized his three assistants.

"Quick!" he exclaimed. "Hold her, Chick!" and he put Madge into Chick's arms. "I have drugged her with some of her own stuff. There's plenty of it in the house. Get into the woods, all of you, over there"—and he pointed to the spot he wished them to go—"and wait for me. I'll be there in a moment."

While they obeyed him, he turned back into the house; and from the edge of the clearing, where the others had concealed themselves, they presently saw a blaze flare up inside the house; then another, and then another, until there were many of them; and then Nick Carter dashed out of it again and ran toward them with all speed.

"Look, now!" he said. "Watch that upper window, in the gable!"

And looking as he commanded them to do, they presently saw, when the light had gained in brightness, the form of a woman standing there, outlined against the blazing fire; and if they had not known differently, there was not one of them who would not have sworn that it was Black Madge who stood there, surrounded by flames.

"It is a dummy that I fixed up," whispered the detective. "It was done to keep the attention of the crowd away from us. Look! The men have discovered the fire!"

The hoboes were rushing toward the scene in crowds now; and they saw the figure of the woman at the window in the gable instantly.

A cry, then a shout, then a wail went up, for they thought it was their chief—Black Madge, otherwise Hobo Harry, the Beggar King, as she preferred to be known outside her own fraternity; and in that instant the crowd went mad.

There was not a soul among them who did not rush to the rescue of their chief, believing that Nick's dummy at the window was she; and then danced and shouted, and yelled and screamed around that burning cottage, like so many madmen.

"Come, now," said the detective. "This is our opportunity!"

Like shadows they sped away through the trees. They skirted the glade, now without a sign of life within it; they hurried down the path among

the alders toward the place where the boat was kept, and where there were now no less than four boats.

But they took them all in order that none might be left for the pursuers, when it should occur to them to take up the chase; and then, with the strength of desperation, and guided by Nick, who had been twice over the route without being blindfolded, they made their way silently and swiftly through the maze of the swamp, to dry land at the other side of it.

"We have not made good our escape yet," said Nick, as they climbed the grade of the railway. "If only a train would come along now, so we could flag it—hark!"

Even as he spoke, a freight came around the curve toward them, and Nick, giving the unconscious form of Madge into the care of Chick, leaped out upon the track between the rails, and, at the risk of his life, stood within the glare of the advancing headlight and waved his coat for the engineer to stop.

Fortunately it was a freight, and it was going rather slowly. The engineer saw the frantic appeal, and closed his throttle and applied the brakes.

The party was taken aboard, and Black Madge was locked up in the jail at Calamont. She jeered at her captors, assuring them that she would be free again, and that when she was they had better remember who and what she was.

Nick and his assistants then returned to New York, pretty thoroughly tired out by their experiences with Black Madge and her followers.

The following day Nick Carter called upon the president of the E. & S. W. R. R. Co., and told him the story of the capture of "Hobo Harry."

"Also, I want to tell you," said the detective, "that I was one of the burglars that robbed the bank at Calamont. I see there is quite a stir about it. But I know where the loot is concealed, and if you will raise a

hundred men for me I will go back and clean out that swamp, and not only return the property to the bank, but I will find almost all that has been stolen from different places for a long time."

Arrangements were at once made to carry out Nick's plans, but the detective was not quick enough.

The news of the arrest of Black Madge had spread through the surrounding country like wildfire, and, by the time Nick and his force of railroad employees reached the place, the gang had fled, and the people of the near-by towns, having formed vigilance committees, had swooped down on the stronghold in the swamp.

Nick and his men, however, destroyed everything that remained, with axes and matches, and what they could not destroy in that way they blew up with dynamite, so that the place no longer offered a refuge for the hoboes.

CHAPTER X.

ESCAPE OF THE HOBO QUEEN.

It was about a week later that Nick Carter received a note from the president of the railroad which caused him great astonishment. It was brief and to the point. It read:

"Can you call on me at once? Black Madge has escaped."

That was all, but it was enough to stir the detective to action, and, taking Patsy, who happened to be in when the message arrived, along with him, Nick at once visited the office of the railroad.

"Well, Carter, it didn't take long for Black Madge to make good her threat, did it?" said the president as he rose and shook hands with the detectives.

"I think," replied the detective, smiling, "that, considering the trouble we were put to in capturing her, it was a very short time for us to hold her. Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Cobalt?"

"Do? Why, you can catch Black Madge again for us."

"Oh," said the detective, smiling. "Can I? Well, possibly."

"You see," the president continued, "we have called a hasty meeting of the board since the information of the escape of Black Madge came to us, and we have decided that no effort shall be spared to get that woman into custody again. At liberty, she is a constant menace to the welfare of

the road, and of every town along the line, as well as of everybody who lives in those towns."

"I'll admit that she's a bad one," said Nick.

"We don't want her at liberty. With the following she has, she is a dangerous woman—much more dangerous than a man would be in her position."

"I don't know about that. But she is dangerous enough without argument about it."

"Exactly. We want her caught. And we want you to catch her."

"I imagine that this time, Mr. Cobalt, it will be rather a harder task than it was before."

"Why so?"

"She will be very much more on her guard now than then. And, besides, she knows enough about me to know that now I will most certainly hunt her down."

The railway president was thoughtful a moment, and then he said:

"You see, Carter, the very manner of her escape is a menace to us."

"How is that?" asked the detective. "The first and, therefore, the only information I have had on the subject was that contained in your message, which told me merely that she had escaped. What is there that is particularly interesting about the manner of her escape?"

"Then you have not heard about it, eh?"

"I have just informed you that I have heard nothing."

"Well, to say the least, her escape was characteristic. Her hoboes did it for her."

Nick raised his brows.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed. "Well, we might have expected something like that, I suppose. I regarded it as a little bit unfortunate that the arrest was made in the county where it was, for that compelled us to put her temporarily in the Calamont jail—and I thought at the time that the Calamont jail was a trifle close to her stamping ground. Now, suppose you tell me exactly what happened."

"You know Calamont, of course?" asked the railway president, and the detective smiled broadly.

"I know very little about it," he said, "with the exception that I assisted in the robbing of a bank that is located there."

It was the president's turn to smile.

"That was a queer experience for you, Carter, wasn't it? But the president of that bank is quite willing that you should rob it again on the same terms. You know we fixed him all up again, and my company promises to keep a large deposit there now. Altogether, they regard your descent upon the bank as a very fortunate experience for them."

"No doubt. Now about that escape."

"Calamont is a village of about three thousand inhabitants. That bank, for instance, is the only one there."

"What has that——"

"Wait a moment. Calamont has suffered a great deal from the depredations of the hoboes, and now has a force of special constables, whose duties consist in arresting and taking to jail every tramp who crosses the borders of the village. The other night, when Madge made her escape, the jail was filled with them."

"Oh," said the detective. "I begin to understand."

"Exactly."

"It was a put-up job on their part to get as many of their kind as possible in the jail for that night, and then to take their queen out of it; eh?"

"Precisely; and that is just what they did do. You see, the tramps began coming in early in the day. They made intervals between the times of their arrivals, and they appeared at different parts of the town, so that before anybody realized it, the jail was about filled with them. But they seemed not to know one another, and so the residents of the town went peacefully to sleep that night, as usual."

"Well, in the morning when they woke up, the jail had been gutted—literally gutted."

"In what sense do you mean?"

"In every sense."

"Tell me what you mean, please."

"I mean that all the tramps who had been locked up there overnight had disappeared; that they had managed to break into the main part of the jail, and that when they went away they took Black Madge with them; and that before they went away they passed through the jail with axes and smashed everything in sight. They tore down partitions, they smashed doors, and where the doors could not be smashed, they destroyed the locks. They tied up the jailer, and threatened to kill him—I regard it as a wonder that they did not kill him."

"So do I. Go on."

"That is all there is to it. They went there, of course, with the deliberate intention of rescuing Black Madge—and they did it."

"I suppose they must have taken to the woods north of the railway line; eh?"

"You've guessed it, Carter."

"That is a wild country up through there, Mr. Cobalt."

"You bet it is. I used to go through there every fall on a hunting expedition, when I was younger.

The country hasn't changed much since that time. It is as wild as if it were in an uncivilized country, instead of being surrounded by——"

"I understand. Then you do know something about that country up through there, eh?"

"Yes; I used to boast that I knew every inch of it; but, of course, that wasn't quite so, you know."

"Yet you remember it fairly well?"

"I think so."

"Tell me something about it, for that is, I think, where I have got to search for the woman we are after."

"There isn't much to tell about it, save that it is wild and uneven; that the formation is limestone, and the timber is largely red oak. The mountains—or hills, rather—are not high, but they are precipitous, rocky, impassable, full of ravines, and gulches, and unexpected depressions, and scattered around through that region there are innumerable caves, too."

"That is bad," said the detective. "It will make it so much the harder to dislodge the hoboes."

"So you have got your work cut out for you this time, and no mistake."

"Could you suggest a competent guide for that region, Mr. Cobalt?"

"Old Bill Turner—if he would go."

"Who is he?"

"An old hunter, who used to take me out with him, and who afterward served as guide for me. But he is an old man now."

"Where does he live?"

"In Calamont. You will have no difficulty in finding him. Ask the first man you meet in the street to direct you to old Bill Turner, and he will do it."

"That part of it is all right—if he is not too old to go."

"Oh, I think he can be induced to do it. Old Bill likes the looks of a dollar as well as any man you ever knew. You have only to offer him enough, and his rheumatism will disappear like magic."

"Then that part of it is all right, too. I am to understand that I have the same free hand in the matter that I did before?"

"Of course. Your directions are: Catch Black Madge and break up her gang."

"And that, I suppose, is about all that you have to say to me at present."

"Yes; unless you have some questions to ask."

"Not one, thank you. I will ask them of Black Madge—when I catch her."

"Good! I hope it won't be long before you can ask them."

"I don't think it will be very long; only, she is a little bit the smartest woman I ever tried to handle."

CHAPTER XI.

PATSY'S DANGEROUS MISSION.

When Nick Carter and Patsy left the office of the railway president, they strolled in silence down the street until they came to a restaurant, and, entering, they found a secluded table in one corner, where they seated themselves and gave the order for luncheon.

When it was brought to them, and the waiter had departed, Nick said to his assistant:

"Well, Patsy, we start about where we began on the other case, with the single exception that we have broken up the stronghold in the swamp. It is safe to say that Madge has no less than fifty men around her, and probably as many more. I should not be surprised if there were fully one hundred in the gang, all told."

"Nor I."

"Well, I shall start for Calamont as soon as I have finished with the meal I am now eating."

"And what do you wish me to do?"

"I want you to do a serious thing, and a dangerous one, Patsy."

"Good! That is what I would like to do."

"I think that Black Madge rather liked you in your character of a young Irish crook; but I think also that she had some suspicion of you."

"There isn't any doubt of that."

"And, therefore, it will be an extremely dangerous thing to do to return there, and still represent yourself as the same character."

"Gee! Is *that* what you want me to do?"

"Yes. Do you suppose it can be done?"

"It can be tried."

"You must not forget that they will look upon you with suspicion."

"Oh, I don't forget that."

"They will connect you with their misfortunes at once. Handsome, particularly, after being so nicely fooled by me, will be even more suspicious of you."

"I think I can get around Handsome, all right. It is Madge I am shy of."

"There will be one thing in your favor, Patsy, if you *do* undertake it."

"If I *do* undertake it? Of course, I shall undertake it."

"Then there will be one thing in your favor."

"What is that, please?"

"The very fact that you *do* go back among them in the same character in which you appeared before. I am inclined to think that now they would not take in a new man, no matter how well he might be recommended; but one that they have known before will stand a lot better chance with them."

"I think so."

"The very fact of your returning will go far to allay any suspicions they might have had about you formerly. It would never occur to them that if

you were really a detective that time, you would dare to return to them in the same character."

"You are right about that."

"And, consequently, if you succeed in passing the investigation of the first few hours, you will be all right."

"I am going to try it, anyhow."

"Good, Patsy! But don't for a moment forget or neglect the danger you will be in every minute you are there."

"I will not."

"You will have to cook up a good story——"

"I have that all ready now."

"Then you can start whenever you please. I shall not interfere with you in the slightest manner."

"But I want a little further instruction, chief."

"The only instruction I have to give you is this: Go there; get among them; become one of them, and one with them; pick up all the information about them that you can, with names and identifications, so that you will be a good witness against them when the time comes."

"I can do that."

"I want you to work independently of me entirely. Your only part of the game, so far as it is directly connected with my part of the work, will be to hold yourself in readiness to lend me a helping hand from the inside at any moment I may happen to want you."

"Of course. That goes without saying. Are Chick and Ten-Ichi going to be in this?"

"Yes. But I have not determined in what way as yet. You will have to be on the lookout for them. I may take one of them with me, and send the other in to follow you. Or I may send both after you, and go it alone myself. Or I may take them both with me. All that will depend upon what information I pick up when I get to Calamont."

"I see."

"Now, Patsy, it is up to you. All that red you used on your hair before has not disappeared yet; but you had better go to a hair dyer's and get it fixed up over again. Then make yourself over once more into Pat Slick. I leave the rest to you. But as a last warning, I repeat—look out for that man Handsome."

"Oh, I am not afraid of Handsome. He's a——"

"He is a much smarter man than either of us gave him credit for. He is an educated man, who can represent the hobo so perfectly that you would never suspect that he has a college education. And he is devoted to Madge. Look out for him. He is her right-hand man, and he is dangerous. If he saw through you before, or had any idea that he did see through you, your life won't be worth a snap of your finger the next time you meet—unless you can manage to shoot first."

"I know that, too. But he did not suspect."

"I am not so sure of that. Madge had a little time to think things over while she was in the jail, and as soon as she got out, she and Handsome had a chance to talk things over. With their two heads together, they make about as dangerous a pair to play against as could be imagined."

"All right. I'll stand pat—and bluff."

"Be careful that they don't call you. That's all."

"Is there any particular game afoot with the hoboes just now?"

"Not that I know of."

"What specific charge are we after Madge for?"

"No specific charge, save that she is accused of all the old ones. There is enough against her to send her to prison for the rest of her life, once she is caught."

"I guess that's no pipe dream."

"The railway people object to her being at liberty. That is about all."

"And it is up to us to catch her?"

"That's the idea."

"What about the rest of the gang?"

"If we can round up the entire outfit, that is what they want us to do. We are to get as many of them as we can, and make the charges after that. That is what you are going inside the ring for: to pick up all the information about the individual members of the gang that you can."

"I see."

"The battle cry is: Break up the gang! Root it out, so that it cannot grow again."

"It is a pretty big proposition, chief; don't you think so?"

"It is a big proposition, and no mistake. But I shall make my arrangements about that part of it, so that if we ever succeed in getting them rounded up, there will be no difficulty in carrying out the rest of it."

"All right. Now, I suppose I have my instructions."

"Yes."

"And that's all?"

"Yes."

"And you don't expect to see me or to communicate with me again until —when?"

"Until I see you inside the stronghold of the hobo gang."

"That is all right. We'll meet there. I'll get there, and I'll find a way to make them believe in me."

"I hesitate to send you on this business, Patsy. You have never in your life gone out to face quite as much peril as you will find in this expedition of yours now."

"Well, I'll face it; and I'll overcome it, chief."

"You're a good lad, Patsy. God bless you!"

"Don't worry about me, chief; not at all. I will be all right. The hobo hasn't been born yet who can get away with me."

"Don't forget that there are perhaps one hundred of them."

"I'm not forgetting it."

"And that the worst and most dangerous of the lot is the man called Handsome."

"I'll not forget that, either."

Nick rose from the table and stretched out his hand.

"Good-by, my lad," he said. "I don't know when we will meet again. A lot depends upon yourself. Even now I feel almost as if I ought not— —"

"Don't say another word, please. I'm going to do what you have laid out for me to do. I wouldn't obey you now if you should change the order."

"Oh, yes, you would. But I won't change it."

And so they parted there in the restaurant.

And a little later Nick Carter took the train for Calamont.

CHAPTER XII.

BILL TURNER, THE WOODSMAN.

When Nick Carter arrived at Calamont, he was disguised as a lumberman. It was not exactly the season of the year for lumbermen to enter the woods, unless they were measurers, who were engaged in preparing in advance work for the winter; so that was the character which Nick Carter adopted.

Measurers go into the woods, measure trees on the stump, as it is called, blaze them with cabalistic marks, and otherwise prepare the way for the workers with the axes and saws who are to come later.

It is well known that some of the most expert lumbermen in the world are French Canadians, and so Nick adopted this character, and he knew that as such he could wander at will around the woods and mountains of that region without danger of being suspected for what he really was.

If any of the hoboes who made their headquarters in that region should see him, they would not be inclined to suspect what he really was, and the only actual danger he would stand in would be that they might be inclined to knock him on the head or shoot him from ambush in order to possess themselves of the few articles he had in his possession.

And for that very reason he adopted the disguise of a French Canadian lumberman, for it was rarely that they were supposed to have anything more than what they carried in sight on their backs.

The month was September, and therefore warm. The leaves in some places were getting yellow and red, although there had been no frost; but oak leaves turn earlier than others.

When he descended at Calamont Station, he stood there on the platform until the train had pulled out, and the other passengers who had arrived by it had departed their several ways. Then he approached the baggageman.

"Me want find ze man named Beel Turner," he said slowly.

"What's that?" asked the baggageman.

"Me want find Beel Turner."

"Oh! Bill Turner, is it? Well, go up that street there until you come to the post office. You'll like enough see an old, white-whiskered chap standing there, chewing tobacco. That'll be Bill Turner."

"Beel Turner? He ees known here? No?"

"Known here? Gee! He has lived here since the oldest inhabitant was a baby. He has always lived here. He is about a thousand years old, my man; but as strong and as lively as a kid yet. You'll find him somewhere around the post office."

Nick thanked him in his broken English and strode up the street.

Sure enough, when he arrived in the vicinity of the post office, he saw a white-whiskered man standing there, and he approached him at once.

"You ees Beel Turner?" he asked modestly, sidling up to the man.

"I be," was the response, while Bill Turner fixed his clear gray eyes upon the detective. "What might you be wantin' of me, stranger?"

"I have—hush!—I have some money for you, Beel Turner. Can you take me where we can talk so that nobody will overhear us?"

Turner eyed him suspiciously for a moment; then he turned abruptly away with the remark:

"Come along with me, stranger."

Nick walked beside him through the town to the very end of the main street. Then they turned into a roadway, which led up a steep hill for some distance, and which presently brought them to a modest cottage that was almost hidden under the brow of the hill.

"Here is where I live," said Turner. "I live here all alone, 'cept a cat and two dogs. But the dogs hev got old like me, now, and they can't go out among the hills as they used to; although, bless you, I reckon I kin walk jest as fur as ever I could, if I try. Come in."

Nick followed him inside, and Turner offered him a rocker near the open window. The whole house was as neat and clean as if it had the care of a woman.

"Now, mister," said Turner, "what hev ye got on yer mind?"

"In the first place," replied Nick, in his natural voice, "I am not what I seem to be. I am not a lumberman, or a Frenchman—or a Canadian. I am a detective."

"Sho! You don't say so. Well, that beats me. Sure, ye do it fine, mister. I would never hev suspected at all that you are not what you seem. But go on."

"I have come here after that gang of hoboes who infest the neighborhood for fifty or sixty miles around this place. I am principally after the woman who is their chief. Do you know who I mean?"

"I reckon ye must be referrin' to that there Black Madge and her gang."

"That's right."

"Well, yer up agin' a proposition. That's all I kin say about it."

"I know that; and what I want of you is to get you to help me with that proposition, Bill Turner."

"Ain't I too old?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Is there good pay in it?"

"The very best; and there is fifty dollars down for you right now—if you are inclined to do as I want you to do."

Nick took a roll of bills from his pocket as he spoke, and laid it on the table before the avaricious glances of the old man.

"Well, sir," said Turner slowly, "all I've got to say is this: If I can do what you want done, I'll do it. I want that money as bad as anybody could want it and not grab it right now where it is lying; but I have never had a penny in my life that I didn't get honestly, and I am afraid that I'm too old to do what you want done."

"I tell you that you are not."

"Then, in that case, I'll take the money and put it in my pocket—so. There! Now, go ahead. If the work is honest, and such as an honest man can do, I'll do it—if I ain't too old, and you say I ain't. But if the work ain't honest, I'll return your money. Now, what is it, mister?"

"I want you first to promise that you will not reveal my identity. I must be Jules Verbeau to you to the end, and you must forget that I am not he in fact."

"You kin consider that done, sir."

"Second, I want you to answer some questions for me."

"Fire away."

"How well do you know the hills and mountains, the ravines and gulches, the rocks and the caves around this region?"

"As well as I know that dooryard in front of you," replied the old man, pointing through the window. "I know every inch of the country—every inch of it."

"Now, another question which you will not understand at once: Do you know how to use a pencil, and is your hand steady enough to draw plans for me?"

"Yes, sir. I began life as a draughtsman; but that was when I was a boy."

"That will suffice. Now—could you draw a plan of different parts of the mountains, so it would be plain enough for me to follow without your being present with me?"

"That would depend upon you, sir. If you are a man who has some woodcraft in your make-up, I say yes. It would depend upon you."

"We will consider that question answered, then. Now, have you any idea to what part of the mountainous region around here—say, within fifty miles of where we are seated—the hobo gang would select in which to hide themselves?"

"I think I could guess it to a dot."

"Why?"

"Because there is one region up among those hills which is exactly fitted for them; and from which you couldn't drive them out with a thousand men. That's why!"

"Good. That sounds as if it might be the place they would select. How far is it from here, as you would travel afoot."

"A matter of thirty miles."

"Now, can you draw me a plan of that region?"

"I kin."

"And how to get there?"

"I kin."

"And are there caverns there? Do you suppose those people are hiding and making their headquarters in caves?"

"Yes, to both questions. The hills round that 'ere region are honeycombed with caves. Some of 'em is big, and some of 'em is little; but there's a lot of 'em there."

"Good; and you know them well enough to give me a working plan of them? What a sailor would call a chart?"

"You bet I do."

"Now, another subject: Have you ever traveled away from here? Have you ever been to New York, for instance?"

"Never in my life. I've always lived right around here. I don't suppose I have been ten miles away from here, except in the woods, in forty years. But in the woods I sometimes used to go a good ways."

"I've no doubt of that. How would you like to make a visit to New York?"

"I should like it very much—only it would cost such a lot, you know."

"Suppose your expenses were paid?"

"Well, that would be different."

"How much, in cash, will you take for your whiskers, Mr. Turner?"

"Now what the devil do you mean by that? Are you making fun of me?"

"Not at all. I was wondering if fifty dollars more, down, would induce you to shave off your whiskers."

"Humph! Jest tell me what you are getting at and I'll answer you."

"This: I want to disguise myself so that I look like you. I want to go out in the mountains as you would go out. While I am making believe that I am Bill Turner, I want you to take a trip to New York, and to live there, at my house, and take it easy, see all the sights, go to the theatres and the museums, and all that, until I return, and I want you to shave off your whiskers, and let me blacken your brows and otherwise make some changes in your appearance, so that if any of the people from Calamont should happen to meet you in the street down there they wouldn't say, 'Why, there is Bill Turner!' Would you consent to do that?"

"For another fifty dollars down?"

"Yes."

"I will tell you in good time. First, I want you to fix up those plans."

"Hadn't I better git about it right now?"

"Yes. I think you had. And I will remain here with you while you do it in order that you may explain things to me as you work upon them."

"That's a good idee, too. I can make you know them mountings as well as I do, in a short time. I knows 'em so well——"

"That reminds me. Do you happen to know by sight, or have an acquaintance with, any of the members of that gang?"

The old man shifted uneasily in his chair, and at last he replied:

"I know one of them—purty well. He calls himself Handsome."

"Good! What does Handsome know about you, Bill?"

"He don't know nothin' about me, 'cept that I'm a woodsman, and that I'm too old to do him any harm. I helped him once, and once he helped me a leetle, and we're sort of friends. But I ain't never seen him but twice in my life, and then both times I met him in the woods, so I ain't never mentioned nothin' about him to other folks."

"That's splendid! It is just what I hoped. It couldn't be better! I want you now to tell me what you talked about when you and Handsome met each other those two times in the woods."

"That's easy. The first time, I was walking through the woods, up about where you are going—that is, it was in that region—when I heard somebody hollerin' fur help. At first I couldn't tell for the life of me where the hollerin' come from; but after a leetle I located it up on the side of one of them steep hills, and so I crawled up there. Well, when I got there, I found that a man had slid into a hole in the rocks, and that he couldn't git out nohow. If I hadn't happened along the chances are that he'd starved before he'd ha' been helped out."

"And as it was—what?"

"I helped him out. I didn't have no hatchet, but I had a good huntin' knife along with me, and I managed to whittle down a good-sized spruce, which I trimmed so's to make a sort of ladder of it. When that was done I lowered the butt end of it into the hole, and Handsome—that was who it was in the bottom of the hole—he climbed up so's I could get hold of him, and then I pulled him out. There wasn't much to that, was there?"

"It saved his life."

"Probably."

"Wasn't he grateful?"

"Suttingly."

"What did you talk about after that?"

"We sot down there a spell and chinned, that's all. He axed me who I was, and I told him. He axed me if I was long in these parts, and I told him allers. He axed me where I lived, and I told him about this cottage. That's all—only he said he was a hobo, and that he was called Handsome. I allowed that the people who called him that lied mightily; but I didn't say so jest then."

"What more was talked about?"

"Nothin'."

"When was the next time you saw him?"

"That was in the middle of the summer, and it was farther south—not far from the railroad tracks."

"Well, what happened then?"

"That was the time he helped me."

"How was that?"

"I can't never tell you exactly how it was, but somehow I had got my foot wedged in the root of a tree, and I had been tryin' an hour to git it out, without success. The tree was hard, and I was just tacklin' that root with my knife—I'd have cut through it in about an hour, I reckon—when 'long comes that feller Handsome that I had saved from the hole in the rocks. He had an axe on his shoulder, and when he spied me he stopped, and laughed, and laughed until I got mad.

"'Caught in yer own trap, ain't ye?' he axed me.

"'I be,' says I. 'You've got a axe, and mebby you kin help me out o' it.'

"Well, he did. He chopped the root in a jiffy, and I was free; but, bless you, I could 'a' done it myself with my knife in a hour, anyhow. All the same, I was grateful to him, and we sot down on a log and chinned for a while."

"What about?"

"He asked me what I was doing around there, and I told him that I was thinking of looking over the swamp below the tracks a leetle, with some idea of settin' traps there late this fall and winter, and he said as how he wouldn't advise me to do it. He said as how I wouldn't be likely to ketch the sort of animals I was after, and that some of the animals might ketch me; and, as I ain't exactly a fule, I ketched onto what he meant, and I ain't been nigh that place since. And then it turned out afterward as I thought it would, them hoboes had a hidin' place in that very swamp."

"Right you are, Bill!" said Nick, laughing. "Is that all the conversation you had with Handsome?"

"Every bit of it."

"And you have never seen him since?"

"Never. Hold on; he axed me that time if I had ever mentioned the fact of our fust meetin', and I told him I had not. He seemed pleased at that, and he told me never to mention it. I allowed that I didn't see no reason why I should, and he laughed at that and seemed entirely satisfied."

"That is excellent, Bill. Now, we will get at those plans. I don't want to lose any time."

"Would you mind telling me why you axed me all about them two meetings?"

"Not at all. When I go out into the woods in the character of Bill Turner, I am likely at some time to run across Handsome himself. I want to be posted, so that he won't know but what I am you. I don't want him to catch me; see?"

"Yes. But do you suppose you kin fix yourself to look enough like me so's he won't know the difference when he sees you?"

"Certainly."

The old man shook his head.

"I don't believe it," he said, "but maybe you can. How about the voice? Your voice ain't no more like mine than a——"

"I can do that, too," replied Nick, exactly simulating the voice in which the old man was speaking; and he looked around him in wonder, and then at the detective.

"It does beat all!" he said at last. "I guess you're some too many for me, sir."

"Shall we get at those plans now?"

"Right away."

Turner brought out paper and pencil, and, having cleared the top of his table, he began to work.

First he drew a large circle on the paper, and at one edge of it he made a cross.

"That there cross is Calamont," he said. "Where we be now; and all that's inside of the ring I've made lies to the east of here, from nor'-nor'east to sou'-sou'east—and east. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, jest about in the middle o' that ring is the place where I think them fellers would hide. It's the best place for them."

"Tell me about it before you draw anything; or, rather, talk while you are drawing."

"That's jest what I'm going to do. Now, you follow my pencil and pay attention."

"Go ahead," said Nick.

"When you leave here—if you start from Calamont, which I suppose you will—you start right about here. You take a general direction nor'east from here at first. You'll find a path through the woods after you git about two miles from here, and that path will lead you several miles. But about here it'll disappear, and you won't have nothin' to guide you 'cept what I show you and tell you now."

"Exactly," replied the detective.

"Up here, at about the time you lose all trace o' the path, you'll come to a deep ravine. You want to follow up the middle of that, to the top. And when you git to the top of it you will think that you have run up ag'inst a cliff, and there ain't no gettin' out of it without goin' back.

"But that ain't so. There's a waterfall at the end of the ravine. It comes around a sort of a twist in the rocks, and if you ain't afraid of gettin' damp, you follow around there, and you will find as nice a piece of steps cut in them stones as you ever saw in your life. Indians cut 'em more'n a hundred years ago, so I'm told.

"Well, they take you to the top of that cliff. When you're up there, you find you're in another ravine, not so deep as t'other. Right here that would be," he added, making a mark with the pencil.

"All right," said Nick.

"About a mile farther up that second ravine you want to leave it. You'll find a big dead oak that hangs out over it, and beside the dead oak there is a path up the side of the ravine. It is one of my own paths. You get up it by hangin' onto two things you find there for the purpose. I put 'em there more'n twenty years ago, mister."

"Go ahead."

"When you git to the top, you want to branch off this way—so. You'll find a clearin' about there, and off to the east you'll see some high hills. You want to make for them."

"And those hills, I suppose, is my destination."

"That's where the caves are. That's where you will find the gang if they are hiding anywhere in that 'ere region."

"Now, tell me about the caverns. Tell me how to find them."

"They're easy enough to find—some of 'em is; others ain't. Wait a minute."

He pushed that paper aside, and took a fresh one.

"Now, when you come to the hills, you will approach 'em at what we call the Dog's Nose. So named because that's what it looks like. It's a rock that sticks out right about here, and you can't miss it. It looks exactly like a dog's nose, stickin' out and smelling things.

"You want to go right up under that there dog's nose; and when you git there you'll see a hole in the rock that ain't no bigger than the lower half of that window. It's a leetle bit of a hole, and it's as dark as a pocket inside it, too. Nobody, even if they found the hole, would ever think of going in there. It ain't invitin' to look at."

"How did you happen to go into it?"

"I didn't. I came out of it. I got lost in that cave for three days once, when I was a boy, and when I found my way out I came out of that hole. Nobody knows about that entrance but me, though I suppose lots of folks knows it's there."

"And it communicates with the cave?"

"It does. It'll take you to any part of the cave; and there is only one rule to follow in going through it. You'll want a light, though."

"I've got the light. What is the rule?"

"Always—no matter where you are in any of them caves, take the way to the right. Never take a gallery to the left, goin' in either or any direction. It's a rule that holds good in them caves. It's a sort of way that nature provided so's you could find your way through there; and I happened to discover what it was."

"It all sounds very simple and easy."

"And it is, if you've got the pluck and the sand. But it's a ticklish place. There is a good many places in there that I ain't never explored, and don't want to; and it's safe to bet that the hoboes ain't done it, neither. I reckon, mister, that that's about all I kin show you—hold on, though!"

"What now?"

"Well, there's one place up there which it might be handy for you to know about, and I don't think anybody but me knows about it, either."

"What is that?"

"Well, you might find occasion to want to hide yourself away while you are in there."

"That is more than likely, Bill."

"Well, just arter you pass through the hole that is under the Dog's Nose, and about twenty rods from there, you'll find a place where there is a bowlder sort of set into the rocks. You won't notice it unless you look for it, but it is there. Under it you'll find a small stone wedged fast. If you pull out that small stone, and then push on the big rock, it'll swing around like it was on a pivot, and you kin step inside the hole it leaves, and close up the door after you. You'll find an interestin' place in there, too, if you ever have occasion to use it, mister; and nobody will find you there, either."

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK MADGE'S LIEUTENANT.

The detective passed the remainder of that day, and much of the night, in old Bill Turner's company, and during that time they talked incessantly about the mountains to which Nick was going, about the caverns in those mountains, and the trails through them; and when the conversation was finished Nick felt that he could find his way without difficulty wherever he cared to go among them.

When he saw that the old man was tired out, he sent him to bed, and himself dropped upon a couch in Turner's living room, where he slept like a top till morning.

Soon after dawn they were both astir; and after they had eaten some breakfast, and Turner had made his usual pilgrimage to the post office, they began again upon the plans and went over them for the last time.

And then came the task of making the changes in their personal appearance. This, to the layman, sounds like no easy task; but to Nick Carter it was merely the practicing of an art of which he was thoroughly a master.

He had brought with him the things necessary to accomplish the changes; and when the old man returned from the village he set to work —first upon himself—for he knew that he must make his own disguise letter perfect if he hoped to deceive such a man as Handsome.

He first made up his face, not with paints, but with stains that would not wash off, to represent the leathery, weather-beaten countenance of the old man; and here he was, perhaps, fortunate in the fact that the profusion of white whiskers worn by the old man rendered his face the easier to copy, and in reality concealed much of it from view.

Then he adjusted the beard.

But not as false beards are supposed to be adjusted. This was done almost hair by hair. That is, the beard was divided into tufts of hair, and each tuft was stuck on with a glue of Nick's own creation, so that there was no danger that it would drop off under any circumstances—and so that it could not be pulled off without drawing patches of skin with it.

And this was as it should be, since if any one should suppose that the whiskers might be false, and should seize them and pull sharply upon them, they would resist the effort exactly as if the beard was natural.

In height the two men were about the same. In figure, the old man was possibly somewhat stouter than Nick; but there was not enough difference to be noticeable.

The detective occupied about three hours in making up that disguise, so particular was he about it; but when it was finished at last it was perfect. So perfect, indeed, that Turner regarded him in amazement; then came closer to look into his eyes, and at last he said:

"I'm glad, Mr. Carter, that I didn't meet you on the street in that rig. It would have frightened me to death. I'd have been sure that I was dead and had met my own ghost, out for a walk."

That night, when the train bound for the city passed through Calamont at half-past eleven, a man climbed aboard of it who—if anybody had noticed him particularly—it would have been supposed was the same French Canadian lumberman who had appeared there the day before.

But there was no one there save the ticket agent, and he did not notice particularly. It is certain that he had no idea that in the black-haired man who went away was old Bill Turner.

But so it was. Nick had made the old man up in a representation of the Frenchman; or at least near enough to it so that in the darkness the difference would not be noticed; and the old man, being made to appear young, really felt young, and he went away joyously.

In his pockets he carried letters; one was to Chick, and the other was to Joseph, his confidential servant, in case Chick should happen not to be at home when Turner arrived there.

And those letters gave instructions that Turner was to be treated to everything he wanted, and that Chick and Ten-Ichi should take turns in showing him about the city. Nick assured them that they could help him quite as much in that way as if they were among the mountains with him, assisting him in the actual work.

And the next morning—the morning after the departure of Turner—Nick took the old man's place in the customary stroll, or hobble would be a better word, to the post office.

He stopped and talked with people as he met them, having posted himself, with the old man's aid, in what he was to say. And he stood around the post office steps for two hours, as Turner was in the habit of doing.

He was trying out the part; trying it on the dog, so to speak. And he was thoroughly satisfied with the result.

In his talks there in front of the post office he gave it out that he was going to take another trip into the woods; and as it was the season of the year when Turner had been in the habit of being absent, no surprise was

Once he was in the woods, Nick quickened his pace. He realized now that, figuratively, he had burned his bridges behind him, and that he must see the thing through to the end.

He did not fear the consequences at all; he felt that there was only one chance of his failure, and that was in the shrewd eyes and keen intelligence of Handsome.

Handsome had met Turner twice and talked with him each time. Nick knew Handsome well enough to know that the outlaw would have studied Turner very closely at those interviews; the question now was, would Handsome detect the fraud?

Nick did not think it likely; and, anyhow, the risk had to be taken.

That night the detective made himself a fire and camped in the woods; in the early morning he started on again.

In due course of time he came to the ravine, and went up it to the top as the old man had directed him to do. And he went around the "rocks with a sort of a twist in them" until he found the steps that were cut in the stones, and so mounted to the top.

Far up the second ravine he found the dead tree that hung over it, and the pathway up the side of the hill beside it; and that night he camped again in the woods.

He had not far to go that second morning, after he had eaten some breakfast, before he arrived at the Dog's Nose. It was ten o'clock in the morning when he got there.

All that morning Nick had noticed signs that he was approaching the region where he would find the hobo gang. He had seen where trees had been chopped down and corded up for firewood; and there were many other signs that many men were in the vicinity.

When he came to the shelter of the Dog's Nose, he stopped there, and, having fixed himself a temporary camp, resolved that he would remain there until night, for he had some hope that some of the hoboes would happen along, and that he could talk with them.

That was his game; not to sneak upon them unawares, but to let it be known that he was in the neighborhood, so that Handsome would come to him. He wanted that ordeal over with Handsome as soon as possible.

He was destined not to be disappointed. The afternoon was well advanced when Handsome suddenly stepped out of a cluster of balsams, and stood before him.

He had approached as silently as an Indian; as if he had passed his life in woodcraft, and, indeed, Nick had no doubt that he had.

For a moment he stood there near the balsams, silently regarding the detective; and Nick, perfectly acting the part of Turner, looked up and nodded, but said nothing.

After a little Handsome strode forward, no longer taking care to remain quiet; and he seated himself on a log near Nick, and facing him, while at the same time he toyed with apparent carelessness with a revolver he held in his hand.

"What brings you here, Turner?" he asked at last.

"The season of the year brings me," was the reply. "I have come here every autumn at this time for more'n fifty years."

"Indeed!" Handsome looked at him with new interest. "Is that true?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have any reason to lie to ye, would I?" asked Nick. "Old Bill Turner hasn't missed a year in fifty years in coming here, Mr. Handsome."

"Then you must know these hills mighty well, eh?"

"I know every inch of 'em; every leaf that falls on 'em, almost. That's the way I know 'em."

"And do you know about the places under the hills as well?"

"Do you mean the caves?"

"I do."

"I know 'em purty well—yes. There is some parts of 'em that nobody knows, I reckon; and while I—well, maybe I don't know all about 'em, and maybe I'd get lost in 'em now; only I don't think so."

"What do you know about that hole up there, under that rock that is shaped like the nose of a dog?"

"I know it's a hole. I reckon that's about all that anybody knows about it. It's a dark sort of a place. I ain't got no fancy for goin' into it."

"Does it connect with the main part of the cavern?"

"Maybe it does, and maybe it doesn't; but most likely it does; only I don't think that anybody would be after trying to find out."

"You have never been through that hole, then?"

"I ain't never been inside of it," replied Nick, with perfect truth.

Handsome thought a moment, and then he asked suddenly:

"Turner, who sent you up here?"

"Nobody sent me; why?"

"Didn't the people of Calamont send you to find me and my followers?"

"Nary a bit of it."

"Well, now that you have seen me, and know that I am here, and therefore guess that others are here with me, what would you do about it if you should go back to Calamont now, and somebody there should ask you if you had seen me?"

"Look here, Handsome, I don't meddle with other people's affairs. I want 'em to leave mine alone, and consequently I leave theirn alone. You hear me speak!"

"But what answer would you make if that question was asked of you?"

"I probably shouldn't answer at all."

"Suppose an answer was insisted upon?"

"I ain't never found nobody yet who could make old Bill Turner answer a question if he didn't want to."

"Do you mean that you would not wish to answer that question?"

"Look here, Handsome, if you want me to promise that I won't tell on ye, why don't you say so? What you and your fellers do ain't none of my funeral, so long as you leave me alone. Do you think I came up here to spy on you?"

"That is what I thought when I first discovered you."

"Well, forget it. I ain't carryin' no tales. I'd 'a' been dead long ago if I had done that. Life's too short. I ain't never mentioned to nobody about the two times I have met you, and I ain't likely to, either. I ain't got time. You ain't robbed my house, and I don't care what you do as long as you leave me alone."

Again Handsome was silent a while, and then he said suddenly:

"Turner, would you like to go to our camp?"

"No; that is, I ain't particular about it. You might think I was trying to spy on ye—or some of the men might, and that would make me mad."

"They won't think anything of the kind if I take you there."

"All right. If you want me to go—I'll go."

"Come along, then. You have got this far, and we've either got to trust you, or kill you. It will depend upon you which that will be."

Keeping in his mind's eye the plans that Turner had made for him, Nick knew perfectly the route over which Handsome led him on the way to the camp, to which he had referred.

It was a picturesque place. Turner had described it in detail to the detective, and had mentioned it as the most likely place for the outlaws to make their headquarters. He had said:

"Ye see, mister, it's a sort of sasser in the mountings. There ain't only one way to git to it from the outside, and that is a purty hard one; so hard that half a dozen men could hold it agin' a thousand; and the other way to git to it is through the caves; and ye've got to know them galleries mighty well in order to find yer way through. I think you'll do it, because you act as if you had been in caves afore."

The place was a "sasser" in the mountains, sure enough. On every side of it there were frowning cliffs, which rose hundreds of feet in the air; and these cliffs were as inaccessible from the outside as they were from the saucer itself. There was only one pathway, and that was through a narrow fissure, barely wide enough for one big man to walk through it.

And this latter could have been stopped up with rocks in half an hour, so that nobody could get through it.

Handsome made the supposed Turner walk in front of him when they entered the fissure; and thus it was that they appeared on the opposite side of it; then Handsome took the lead.

Already the hoboes had erected cabins of slabs and of logs; and many of them were still at work building others; but as with one accord they ceased to work when they saw Handsome approaching with the old man; and they stared at him.

"Have you got another one, Handsome?" somebody called out to him; but Handsome deigned no reply, passing on in silence, and leading the way to a cabin that was larger and better than the others, and which stood exactly in the centre of the miniature valley.

Nick guessed that this was the temporary home of Black Madge, and he was, therefore, not at all surprised when she stepped out upon the porch in front of it.

She showed her white and even teeth, and smiled, in her own bold way, as Handsome approached her, with Nick in tow; and she asked, as soon as they were near enough:

"Whom have we here?"

"It is the old chap I have told you about, Madge," replied Handsome.

"Sent here to spy upon us, I suppose," she smiled scornfully. "Why didn't you shoot him at once instead of bringing him here?"

Before Handsome could reply, Nick wheeled upon him.

"Didn't I tell ye so?" he demanded, with a show of anger. "Didn't I tell ye so? Didn't I say that they be thinking that I was a spy; but you wouldn't have it so? Tell me that."

"I don't think he is a spy, Madge," said Handsome. "Remember that I have known him for a considerable time. And I have found him on the level."

Madge shrugged her shoulders.

"All right," she said. "That is, all right this time. Only now that he is here, he stays. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten that."

"Nobody leaves this valley without my permission; not a single one."

"They are all pretty well satisfied that you mean that, Madge."

"Now, tell me what you brought the old man here for."

"Because he knows every inch of the galleries inside those caves. I want to know about them myself, and I want the old man to teach me about them. The time will come, Madge, when we will be mighty glad to know about those galleries."

"Possibly so," she replied. "Do as you like with him; only remember—nobody leaves this valley without my permission. When I get the men thoroughly organized and so they will do what I want them to do, then I will turn loose upon the world one of the best—and the worst—criminal organizations that has ever been heard of. Do what you please with the old man. He looks old enough to have been dead long ago."

"And as old as I am, madam, I've never before heard a woman speak so to me," said Nick, as if he were hurt by it.

Madge turned to him quickly.

"You mustn't mind what I say—always Turner," she said. "I have a habit of speaking harshly at times; but I am not unkind to those who are true to me. Do you happen to know a man who is named Nick Carter?"

She asked the question suddenly, as if she expected the utterance of the name would make the supposed Turner start with surprise; but Nick looked at her quite calmly, and replied:

"I know the name. He's a detective chap, ain't he? I heerd about him; something about that bank robbery."

"Is he in Calamont now, Turner?"

"No, ma'am; he ain't."

"You speak positively."

"Well, I know he wasn't there when I came out of town; and I didn't hear that he was expected there, nuther. And if he had been expected there I'd 'a' heerd it. There ain't nothin' goin' on in that town that I don't hear about."

"Do you know if he has been sent for?"

"I ain't heerd nothin' about his bein' sent for, ma'am."

"If, some day, I should decide to send you into the village to do some errands for me, do you suppose you could make some inquiries about Nick Carter for me, and at the same time forget all that you know about us, who are here?"

"I reckon I could, ma'am."

"I'll think about it. I may want to use you," she said; and turned away. But she stopped and turned toward them again, calling to Handsome, who went to her side; but Nick could hear the conversation that passed between them.

"What about that fellow Pat?" she heard Madge inquire; and he could barely refrain from giving a start that might have betrayed him, for that question told him plainly that Patsy had already managed to arrive among the hoboes, and—that his fate still hung in the balance. He listened eagerly for Handsome's reply.

"I haven't had a chance to examine him yet," he said. "You wished me to talk with him before I brought him to you."

"Go and bring him here now. Leave Turner here with me until you return."

"Get up there on the porch and sit down, Turner," he said. "Smoke your pipe if you wish to. The queen won't object. I'll be back in a moment."

But when Handsome had hurried away to bring Patsy, and Nick had seated himself upon a rustic chair, Madge came and stood in front of him.

"Turner," she said severely. "Tell me the truth now. What brought you into this neighborhood?"

"The season of the year brought me," Nick replied to her as he had done to Handsome.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me, ma'am."

"Swear to that."

"'Tain't necessary. I have said it."

"Do you know what would happen to you if I should find that you were acting as a spy?"

"I suppose I could guess."

"I'd have you burned at the stake, just as Indians used to burn their captives."

"Well, ma'am, I reckon I've lived too long a time now to be much afraid of death. When a man has passed eighty, he ain't much afraid of things."

"Are you as old as that?"

"Old Bill Turner is eighty-four, ma'am; but he don't look it, does he?"

"No. I wish I could feel sure of you. I wish I could feel sure that you are not a spy."

"Well, ma'am, it's my experience that we can't somehow help our feelings much. If you are in doubt about it, treat it as you would an earache—with silent contempt. Doubts, ma'am, are suthin' like boils; they're the devil and all while you've got 'em; but they do get well arter a while. You ain't got no call to doubt old Bill Turner, as I knows on."

"I'll talk with you again, Turner. In the meantime, see that you walk in a straight line."

"I can't do that no more. My old feet ain't so steady as they used to be. But I'll do the best I can."

"We can't ask anybody to do more than that. Now keep silent. Here comes Handsome with another man who I fear may be a spy."

Patsy, with his hair a brick-red, and with spots and freckles on his face that were a sight to see, came forward at that moment, led by Handsome.

His hands were tied together behind his back, and he looked as if he had been treated rather badly. However, there was a grin upon his face as he approached, and ducked his head in what was intended to be a polite bow to the queen of the outlaws.

"So you have come back again?" she demanded of him abruptly.

"Yes, I'm back, your honor—I mean, ma'am," he replied, grinning the more.

"Where have you been while you were away, then? Tell me that?"

"Well, sure, your majesty, I was a-runnin' most of the time. When the fire broke out down there, and the divil to pay generally, they all thinkin' as how it was y'rsilf that was bein' burrnt to death inside the cottage, I helped all I could until it was found out that it wasn't you, at all, at all, but a dummy that had been fixed up to look like you. And then when the hull bunch of the spalpeens went crazy and tried to find out what had become of you, it wasn't long until I found out that I was all alone in that

place, the rest having gone in search of you. And after that I thought it wasn't healthy for me around there."

"I think you're a spy, Pat," she said coldly.

"Divil a bit of it. Who says so? Don't you belave it!"

"Why did you not stay with the rest of the men, then?"

"Divil a wan of me can tell that same, now. I clean forget. I think I was scared out of me two wits. If I had been a long time wid yez, instid of bein' there only wan day, sure I'd have remained, so I would. But I'd been there so little that I thought it wasn't healthy for me. That's all."

"What made you come back now?"

"Sure I heard that ye'd escaped from your jailers, and I knowed that you'd be after protecting me. Didn't you tell me that I was all right? And, thinks I, if I can find 'em now, sure the quane will be after takin' care of me; and here I am."

"When I heard that you had returned, I made up my mind to have you shot!"

"Oh, glory be to gracious! Don't be after doin' that same, your honor! Faith, why should ye be after shootin' the likes of me? I ain't done nothin' at all."

Patsy, with a perfect assumption of fright, fell upon his knees before the woman and raised his hands beseechingly to her.

And for a moment she looked down upon him with cold contempt in her eyes. It was evident to Nick, who was watching the scene narrowly, that she was coldly calculating the chances of letting him live, and that a breath upon the scales either way would decide her.

For a long time she remained in the same attitude, and then she raised her head and spoke to Handsome.

"When one in my position is in any doubt," she said coldly, "there is only one thing to do, and that is to give myself, not the other person, the benefit of the doubt. That is what I have decided to do, Handsome. Take him away."

"What shall I do with him?"

"Take him back to the cabin where he was tied up, and tie him up again. To-night, when the fires are lit, we will convene a court and try him. I will be the judge at that trial, and after it is over we will probably hang him. I see no other way. Take him away. Go."

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK MADGE GIVES JUDGMENT.

It was a strange scene upon which the light of a huge camp fire shone that night, in the mountain retreat of the outlaws.

A stake had been set in the ground, and to this Patsy was tied, so that all could see him plainly. Somewhat to one side, on a huge rustic chair, made by one of the men, the queen was seated in state, ready to act as judge at the trial that was to begin, and Cremation Mike was selected as prosecuting attorney.

A jury of twelve of the men had been drawn, only it was a foregone conclusion that they would bring in their verdict according as the queen should direct.

Handsome acted as master of ceremonies, and around them was gathered the entire membership of Black Madge's hobo gang—as villainous a looking crew as might be imagined.

As yet, no one had been appointed to defend Pat, and now Madge raised one hand, when she was ready to begin the trial, and she announced:

"There is no one who has offered to act as attorney for the prisoner. This trial will afford you some amusement, my men. We will have a good time out of it, anyhow, before we hang him. I will appoint counsel for him."

They were all silent, waiting, and presently she spoke again.

"I will name the old man there, Bill Turner, as counsel for the defense. Will you defend the man, Turner?"

"I'll try to, madam, though I don't know anything about the case. He may be guilty for all I know. What is he charged with?"

"With being a spy."

"If you want me to defend him, I'll do my best."

"Go ahead, then. Let the trial begin," she ordered.

The prosecution took up the case; that is, Cremation Mike got upon his feet and began to make a speech to the jury. He said:

"We've got proof enough that the man is a spy, ain't we, mates? We all know what happened down there in the swamp, the time that Nick Carter got among us, and carried away Black Madge almost before our eyes, and we none the wiser for it. We know how Nick Carter set the cottage afire after drugging Madge, and how then he fixed up a dummy in one of the windows, so that we would think that she was burning up. We know that, don't we, mates?

"And don't we know that there were four men who came to our camp in the swamp at the same time, and who came together? Wasn't one of that four Nick Carter himself? And were not two others of that same four Nick Carter's assistants? And who was the fourth one of that four? Why, it was that cove there, tied to the stake, and waiting for you to hang him.

"Would he have been in that sort of company if he hadn't been made out of the same kind of cloth? Didn't he come there with that other outfit? Didn't we prove—that is, didn't Madge prove that one of the four was Nick Carter; that another of the four was his assistant, who is called Chick? And that still another of the four was another assistant, who is called Ten-Ichi?

"And don't you know that Nick Carter has got still another assistant, and that his other assistant is named Patsy? Haven't you heard of that? It is true. And so is this fellow's name Pat—or Patsy. It is all the same.

"Now, again, didn't they come here together? Didn't Handsome find them camping in the woods, waiting for a chance to get to our camp, and didn't this fellow tell him the first one of the bunch that he was looking for Hobo Harry, the Beggar King—and ain't Hobo Harry and Black Madge one and the same? I tell you, there ain't any doubt that the man is a spy, and that he ought to be hanged.

"Now, do you guns remember what happened the night of the fire, the time when Nick Carter got away with Madge, and took her to jail? I'll remind you of it. Don't you remember that when we found the other two out, they were sent to the quicksand pit? I was one of those who helped to throw them into the quicksand pit. Did you ever hear of anybody's getting out of that pit alive? I never did until that incident; but I have found out since that both those assistants, Chick and Ten-Ichi, are alive and kicking, down in New York, this very day.

"Well, who got 'em out of that quicksand pit, then? Why, this fellow! That is where he was, and what he was doing while we were fighting the fire, and don't you forget it! We was all too busy to remember about the men we had chucked into the sand; but he didn't forget. For why? Because he was one of them himself, and because he had determined all along to go to that pit as soon as ever he could, and get them out of it.

"How'd he get 'em out, you ask? I don't know. I only know that he did get 'em out somehow, for they are out. I know that for certain."

Nick, in the character of Turner, leaped to his feet.

"I object!" he cried out. "This man ain't tryin' this case fair. I don't know who he is, and I don't keer a cuss; I only know that you app'inted me to defend him, and I'm a-goin' to do it till you tell me to stop. I object, ma'am, to the course he is adoptin'. It ain't fair. He's making a lot of

statements the which he ain't got a shadow of proof about. I don't know anything about that air fire he speaks about, 'ceptin' what I've heerd down at Calamont. But we ain't got the fire here as a witness; and we ain't got the quicksand here as a witness; and we ain't got the two men as he says was saved from it here as witnesses. And unless he can produce witnesses to testify to what he says about them air escapes, I move that the hull speech he made be strucken out, your honor. Let him call his witnesses to the stand, and swear 'em, or swear at 'em. Let him do suthin, 'cept standing up there and shootin' off his mouth."

Madge smiled grimly. She was getting more enjoyment out of this affair than she had anticipated.

"Call your witnesses, Mike," she said.

"I ain't got none, Madge, to swear to what I have said, but every one here knows it is the solemn truth. I don't need no witnesses. However, I'll put Handsome on the stand fur a minute, about the way the bunch arrived at our camp, if you say so."

"I think it would be a good idea. It would be more regular."

"All right, Madge. Handsome, take the stand. Hold up your right hand, and swear that you'll tell the truth. That's all right. Now, did you hear what I said about your findin' that outfit in the woods north of the track?"

"I did."

"Wasn't it the dead-level truth?"

"It was."

"The hull four was there, warn't they?"

"They were."

"And they was all strangers?"

"They were."

"You never seen any one of them afore that time, had you?"

"Never."

"And, later, wasn't it found out that three of 'em were spies?"

"It was."

"And wasn't one of the spies Nick Carter himself?"

"Yes."

"And weren't the other two his assistants?"

"They were."

"Didn't they confess it?"

"They did."

"And weren't they afterward thrown into the quicksand pit to die?"

"They were."

"Did they die there?"

"I don't think they did."

"Don't you know that they escaped?"

"I'm reasonably certain of it."

"How did they escape?"

"I don't know that."

"Isn't it your opinion that this galoot here——"

"I object!" shouted Nick.

"Oh, well," exclaimed Mike, in disgust, "ask him some questions yourself, then."

"I will. Handsome, when did you first see them four in the woods north o' the track?"

"Oh, I don't know. Before dark that night."

"Was they together?"

"Part of the time."

"Only part o' the time? What do you mean by that?"

"They didn't come there together."

"Oh, didn't they? Where was you?"

"I was hiding, and watching them."

"So you saw 'em all when they arrived there, did you?"

"Yes."

"Who got there first?"

"This man—Pat."

"Did the others appear to know him?"

"No; but they didn't appear to know each other, either."

"But if they were spies, and you afterward proved that they were, and if they got there, and found Pat already there, it would be natural that they should act as if they didn't know each other, wouldn't it, in order to deceive him?"

"I suppose so."

"Have you ever seen anything suspicious about the prisoner?"

"No; only his disappearance after the fire and the arrest of Madge."

"P'r'aps he kin explain that."

"He can't. He has tried already. You heard him. I don't call that an explanation, but it is probably the best he can give."

"Would you be afraid to trust him now?"

"Personally? I don't think I would."

"Then, personally, you don't think that he is a spy?"

"No; but I don't *know* that he isn't."

"That'll do. I don't want to ask you any more questions." He turned to Cremation Mike. "Have you got any more witnesses?" he asked.

"No," with a grin. "I don't need no more."

"Maybe not. But I've got one witness."

"Oh! Have you. Who is it?"

"I'm going to put the prisoner on the stand."

But Madge was plainly tired of the amusement already. She rose in her place, and her eyes were flashing darkly.

"We will stop this farce here and now," she said. "It won't do any good, anyhow. I can see plainly enough that there are some here who believe he is a spy. I am a good deal of that opinion myself; and as there is a doubt in my mind, I'll just settle the thing right now. Jury, you can find the man guilty. That's what he is, probably."

"Guilty," said the jury, with one voice, and grinning.

"Prisoner," continued Madge, "you have got until to-morrow morning, at nine o'clock, to live. At that time the boys will take you to some

convenient tree, and hang you by the neck until you're dead—and that settles it."

Things looked dark for Patsy. It was quite evident that Black Madge was in deadly earnest in what she had said. One life more or less was absolutely nothing to her, and if there was the breath of a suspicion against one, it was, from her standpoint, better to put that one out of the way at once than to run any sort of risk by permitting him to live.

Nor did the hoboes who had gathered there to hear and to witness the trial hesitate to voice their sentiments about it by loud cheering when Madge uttered the sentence of death. It would be a hanging, indeed, and it did not make much difference to them who was hung. It has been said before that they were much like wild beasts, or dogs, who are without any quality of compassion.

When Nick walked away from the scene of the trial near the fire, he found that Handsome was beside him, and then, before either uttered a word, Madge joined them.

She was smiling as if she were well pleased with her evening's work, and she said to the detective:

"You did well, Turner. One would suppose that you had at some time been a lawyer."

"I'd 'a' got the man free if I'd had a fair judge and jury," replied Nick boldly, stroking the white whiskers he wore.

Madge frowned. Then she laughed aloud.

"I like you for your boldness," she said. "But have a care that you do not find yourself suddenly in the same predicament, Turner."

"I'd be inclined to shoot myself afore I came to trial, if I should," Nick retorted.

They had reached Madge's cabin by this time, and now they mounted to the porch, and Nick pulled out an old pipe that Turner had given him, filled it, and lighted it.

The detective was determined in his own mind that before the dawn of another day he would find some way to save Patsy; but how it was to be done he had no idea.

He did not know yet what disposition they intended to make of him. For all he knew they might send him into one of the cabins and lock him up for the night. But he did know that unless he acted, Patsy would be murdered at sunrise the following morning, and he did not intend to permit that to happen.

"Miss Madge," he said, after a pause, during which he had smoked in silence, "if it is all the same to you, I'd like to know what you intend to do with me to-night. I'm an old man, and I'm sorter 'customed to going to bed raythe early, so, if you don't mind, and you'll tell me where I'm to sleep, I think I'll turn in."

Instead of replying directly to him, Madge turned to Handsome.

"What shall we do with him?" she asked. "You are responsible for his being here. I think I will turn him over to you."

"All right," said Handsome, rising. "I'll take him to my own cabin. He'll be safe enough there. I'll be back in a minute, Madge."

Nick followed him across the floor of the little valley to a hut that was at the opposite side of it, and close to the cliff—and Nick knew at once, from his recollection of the plan he had studied, that he was quite near to the entrance to the cavern.

The cabin consisted of only one room, in which two bunks had been roughly built, and, after lighting a candle, Handsome indicated one of these, and said:

"You can sleep there, Turner. Turn in when you like. To-morrow we will explore the caves together."

"Right you are," said Nick, yawning widely. "I shan't need any rocking this night. My old legs are tired out for sure."

Two minutes after the departure of Handsome, Nick blew out the candle, and for a time he stretched himself in the bunk, lest Handsome should return to see that all was right. But it was speedily evident to the detective that Handsome had no suspicion whatever of him, and had, therefore, left him to his own devices.

But Nick knew that it could not be very long before the outlaw would return to seek his own rest and repose, and that he must, therefore, determine upon what he was to do before he should return.

Ten minutes he lay there, and then he rose slowly and cautiously from the bunk and crept to the door which had been left open, and peered out.

The fires were still blazing merrily, and many of the men were gathered around them. Some of the men were playing cards, and the others were engaged in various ways. At all events, they one and all seemed to have forgotten his existence, and that was what he chiefly desired.

Nick knew in which cabin Patsy was a prisoner. He could see it from the doorway where he was standing, almost opposite him at the other side of the valley. The distance in feet from his own position was about the distance of a city block—two hundred feet.

The old silver watch, the size of a turnip, which Turner had carried forty years or more, was in his pocket, and by the light of the stars Nick managed to see the time—ten o'clock.

"There is no time like the present," he mused to himself, while he hesitated in the doorway. "If I wait until all is quiet, I will stand all the more chance of being discovered; and, besides, it won't be long until

Handsome returns here, and after he has come and crawled into his bunk it will be next to impossible for me to get out of here without rousing him—unless I should drug him, and that will not do at all. Handsome is altogether too fly for that. He would know that he had been drugged.

"Now, if it wasn't for these white whiskers, I could creep around the edge of the bottom of the cliff to the cabin where Patsy is, without being noticed; and I dare not take them off——"

He stopped there. There was absolutely no use in conjecturing upon the "ifs" of the question, and so, after another moment, during which he studied the lay of the land intently, he slipped noiselessly out at the door and around behind the cabin, and from there crept on his hands and knees to the bottom of the cliffs. And there he discovered what he had been unable to see in the imperfect light. The grass there was quite tall, where it had not been trampled by the feet of the motley crew that infested the place, and he found that by lying at full length and pulling himself slowly along on his stomach he would be able to conceal himself almost entirely from view.

Nick made that half circle of the small valley, crawling in that way, and entirely without being discovered; and in that manner he arrived directly in the rear of the cabin where Patsy was a prisoner.

But here a new difficulty confronted him. There was a guard in front of the door, and that guard, strangely enough, was Cremation Mike.

The cabin in which Patsy was a prisoner was built of roughly hewn logs, the crevices and chinks being stopped with mud and clay. The ground beneath it was hard—rocky, in fact; so there was no possibility of digging under the logs without tools to do it, and even then it would have taken too much time to accomplish it.

Nick turned his attention to Cremation Mike. He was seated upon a convenient stump, smoking a short pipe. His back was toward the door of the cabin, and he was about ten feet from it. The door itself had been

fastened by passing a freshly cut sapling across its front, and slipping either end of it into rustic slots that had been hastily fashioned for the purpose.

It was plain that there was only one way to get Patsy outside of that cabin, and that was to overcome Cremation Mike; and, having determined upon this, Nick crept forward as silently as a shadow, and so rounded the corner of the cabin, and presently came up half standing, directly behind the unsuspecting outlaw.

Nick did not wish to kill the man, but he did want to knock him out so effectually that he could not interfere in what was to follow, and therefore he had picked up a piece of round, smooth stone, which he had wrapped in his handkerchief.

And now, with this improvised weapon, he struck Cremation Mike sharply on the back of his head, with the result that Mike pitched forward, and would have fallen to the ground had not Nick managed to catch him. Then he laid him down gently upon the ground, and turning swiftly, opened the door of the cabin.

"Quick, Patsy!" he called in a sharp whisper. "It is I. Nick. Come."

Patsy, who had not been bound, it seemed, leaped to the door with a low exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

"Bully, Nick," he whispered. "I thought it was all up with me that time. And do you know, it never once occurred to me that the old man might be you. The disguise is perfect."

"Come," said Nick. "There is no time for words now. Follow me, and do exactly as I do. I want to get back to my own sleeping place before my absence is discovered, if it is possible to do so. But, first, is there any sort of a chair or stool inside that cabin?"

"Yes. A stool."

"Bring it out, if you know where to put your hand upon it."

Patsy brought it in a twinkling, and, placing it against the stump, Nick propped the senseless form of Mike upon it, so that from the front it appeared as if he were seated there quite naturally.

"He will come around presently," said Patsy, "and miss me."

"Let him. That is what I want him to do," replied Nick. "Come on, now."

He dropped upon his knees again, and, with Patsy following, they crept around through the grass again along the edge of the cliff, and at last reached the cabin from which the detective had started.

But he did not stop here. He made at once for the entrance to the cavern, which was near at hand, and passed inside, with Patsy following closely behind him; and then with his electric flash light, he led the way along the corridor of the cave—for it was his object to find that hiding place to which Turner had directed him in case he found it necessary to hide.

"Keep to the right always in that cave, no matter which way you are going," Turner had told him with emphasis, and remembering that now, while he wondered if, after all, there were two corridors to the cavern, he followed the rule, and almost on a run—for the passage was quite smooth before them—he led the way through.

They came at last to the bowlder to which Turner had referred, and Nick removed the small stone from beneath it. And then he pushed upon it as Turner had directed, with the result that the rock swung open before them, leaving an aperture through which they could easily pass.

But Nick did not enter. Instead he thrust a candle and a box of matches into Patsy's grasp, and said to him:

"Remain here until I come for you, even if you get hungry. I don't know any more about what is ahead of you than you do. I only know that you

will be safe there. We have no time to talk now. I will shut this rock behind you." Then he turned and sped away.

CHAPTER XV.

NICK'S CLEVEREST CAPTURE.

Nick Carter made his way as rapidly back through the cavern as he had gone through it with Patsy; but when he arrived at the entrance he came to a stop, and then went ahead again very slowly.

He had no idea how long a time he had been gone, nor what might have happened during his absence. But when he peered out upon the valley, everything was apparently in the condition in which he had left it. If there had been any change at all, it was only that fewer of the men were gathered around the fires. Otherwise everything was the same.

And so, with all the swiftness he could muster, he crawled to the cabin which Handsome had given him to occupy, entered it cautiously, and, finding it empty, crawled into the bunk that had been allotted to him—tired, but rejoiced to think that he had succeeded so well where there had been such small chance of success.

And it so happened that he had barely laid himself down and composed himself to wait for developments, when a great cry went up, which was immediately followed by other shouts and loud curses—and Nick knew that the escape of Patsy had been discovered, and that he had returned just in time to avoid the consequences.

Almost immediately following upon the utterance of the shouts, the door of the cabin flew open, and Handsome leaped inside, his eyes ablaze, and his whole form quivering with rage—and he carried a flash light,

which he threw at once into the detective's face; into the face of the man he supposed to be Bill Turner.

Nick could see that the instant the light fell upon him Handsome seemed greatly relieved; and then, before the outlaw could utter a word, Nick cried out in the voice of old Turner:

"What—what's all that row about, Handsome?" and he blinked his eyes as if he had just been awakened.

"It's lucky for you that you don't know what it's about!" was Handsome's rejoinder. "Get out of that, Turner, and come along with me."

"But, what's the matter?" demanded Nick, sliding out of the bunk. "What has happened?"

"That fellow Pat has escaped—that's what!" was the reply.

"Sho! You don't say so! Well, well, well! When did he do it?"

"I haven't found out yet. Come along. I thought at first that maybe you had had a hand in it—but I see you did not."

"What! Me?"

Every hobo that belonged to the gang had gathered in the centre of the place near where the mock trial had been held, and they were talking earnestly together. Cremation Mike, with one hand held at the back of his head, was the centre of the group—or rather of the throng.

But Handsome burst unceremoniously through the crowd and confronted Mike, Nick following at his heels.

Black Madge forced her way through it at the same time from the opposite side.

"Now, Mike," said Handsome savagely. "Tell me how this happened."

"I don't know. All that I know is, I got a crack on the head from behind. When I woke up, the bar had been ripped off the door and the bird had flown. That's all I know."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"How do I know that? Unless some one can tell how long I've been unconscious. But I'll bet my hat that it ain't ten minutes. I don't think it's three minutes. He can't be far away, and"—grinning—"he can't get away. He can't go through the pass, because the guards are there; I posted them myself; and the only way in which he could hope to get out is through the cave, and I don't believe he could find his way through there. I know that I wouldn't try it myself. I'd rather stay here and be hung."

Madge interrupted the conversation here.

"Do you think that he got out of the cabin without aid?" she asked of Mike. "Do you believe that it was he who struck you, Mike?"

"I do, Madge. I'm sure of it."

"Then, you weren't keeping good guard, that's all."

"Well, I never thought it was possible for him to get out of that cabin. It may be that I dozed. I didn't suppose I did, but——"

"But," said Madge icily, "the point is this: The boys shall not be disappointed in the hanging bee they were to hold in the morning. It is up to you, Mike, to find the prisoner. If you don't find him in time, you shall hang in his place—that's all. I mean it."

Cremation Mike's face turned to the color of chalk, for he realized that she did, indeed, mean what she said. For a moment he stood there trembling, and then he seized a lantern which one of the men was holding, and cried out:

"Come along, whoever will help me. I know that he can't have gone far. He ain't had time. I know it. Come along."

"Wait," said Handsome coolly; and he turned to Nick.

"Turner," he said, "I begin to think that it is fortunate that you came here when you did."

"I am sure of it," said Nick in reply.

"You know that cave from end to end, don't you?

"I think I do."

"Then, you shall act as guide."

"All right. I'm ready."

But this short conversation had called the attention of Madge to the supposed old man, whom she had for the moment forgotten, and now she turned savagely upon him.

"I believe that you are at the bottom of this," she said, her eyes blazing.

Before Nick could make any reply, Handsome broke in.

"That is nonsense, Madge," he said. "I know it. As soon as there was an alarm—as soon as Mike yelled out that the prisoner had escaped, I legged it for the cabin, and I found Turner just waking up from his sleep. He had no hand in it. He couldn't."

"It's lucky for you," said Madge, still eying Nick sharply.

"Will you guide us through the cave, Turner?" demanded Handsome.

"Sure."

"Then, come on."

"Hold on a minute," said Nick. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to send some of the men to guard the other entrances? If the prisoner hasn't had time to get through the cave yet, and if he should happen to find one of the ways out on the other side,

he'd run right into the arms of whoever was on the watch."

"Good!" said Handsome. "We know of two outside entrances. How many do you know about?"

"Four," replied Nick. "Four, not counting the hole under the Dog's Nose. That may be an entrance; but one man can guard that."

"Where are those entrances?"

Glibly Nick described how they might be found, using the exact language that had been used by the old man in his description of them; and after a short delay four men were sent away to each of the entrances, on a run, with instructions to remain on guard before them until they should be relieved.

"Now," said Nick, when they had gone, "we know that the prisoner can't escape. We know it's only a matter of time when he'll be caught—therefore, we needn't hurry. Don't you agree with me, Handsome? He can't get out of the cave at any of the entrances, without being captured or shot down, an', o' course, he can't come back this way without meetin' with the same fate. Ain't that right?"

"I guess it is," agreed Handsome.

"Ain't that right, Miss Madge?" asked Nick again, turning to her.

"It sounds entirely reasonable," she replied. "There has been only one mistake made from the start of this affair, and that is that Pat was not shot down when he first showed himself here. As it stands now, he has temporarily made his escape. I am satisfied, now, that he is a spy, and I

commission each one of you to shoot him down without mercy, on sight. I shall go with you into the cave to search."

"Do you wish me to direct the search?" asked Nick, still standing quietly before her.

"Yes. What have you to suggest?"

"This: There be four entrances outside o' the one here in this little valley. I should divide the men into four parts. I kin direct each party so that it won't have no difficulty in followin' the cavern and searching it thoroughly to the entrance. I'll take one o' the parties. How many men are there here now?"

"Let me see," replied Madge. "Sixteen have gone away to guard the entrances, and four will have to remain here on guard. That takes away twenty. We still have eighty left."

"Good. That'll give us twenty in each party. Now, madam, it's for you to say who'll lead them. Tell me who the leaders will be, and I'll instruct 'em at once."

She picked out four of the men, and ordered them to step forward; and, one by one, Nick directed each of them how to proceed after he had passed the entrance of the cavern with the men who were to follow him; and he made the directions so explicit that there was not one who had any doubt about being able to follow them.

It was as Nick had suspected it would be; that Madge did not yet trust him far enough to give him the sole leadership of one of the parties, but she directed that Handsome should go with him—and at the last moment, when they were ready to start, and after the other three parties had entered the cavern, she decided to accompany Nick's party herself.

"I may as well go along," she said. "I would like to learn something about the interior of that cavern myself, and I don't know a better way to learn it than to go with you."

And so it was that presently the detective found himself in the cavern, leading twenty-two persons, for the extra two were Madge and Handsome.

And the course that Nick had selected for himself was the one that would take him past the hiding place where he had left Patsy; for it was no part of his plan that he should give the others even a chance of an accident of finding that hiding place.

It had been shortly after eleven o'clock when Nick returned to the cabin after assisting Patsy in his escape; it was now after midnight.

There were torches and lanterns in abundance scattered among the four parties that were searching; and, in the directions that Nick had given each party, he had taken good care that they should become thoroughly lost if possible. He had an object in this, as will be seen.

The way through the cave along the route which the detective had selected to follow was smooth and even, as we already know; but Nick made it as long and as rough as possible by taking the party off into some of the side galleries as they proceeded.

He was looking for a place where he might lose some of them, and at least where he might, before the expedition was finished, succeed in separating them.

What he chiefly desired was to finally get either Madge or Handsome alone with him.

It was two hours later before they finally passed the bowlder behind which was the entrance to the hiding place where Patsy was concealed; but not one of the party so much as glanced toward it; and Nick led the

way on past it to the exit—and that exit was not the hole under the Dog's Nose, but a larger one at some distance from it.

There they found the four men who had been sent hither, and they reported that they had seen nothing; and cautioning them to remain on guard, Nick led his party back into the cave again.

And then, after a few moments, he pretended suddenly to find that fifth entrance—the hole under the Dog's Nose—and there four other men were waiting—and they had seen not a thing to suggest the proximity of the prisoner who had escaped.

"Now," said Nick, "I think we'd better s'arch them side galleries more thoroughly. If you'll return with me to the entrance from the valley, we'll start over again, and go into and through every one o' 'em. We'll divide our party into smaller groups o' three and four, and in that way we kin cover all of them at the same time. What do you say?"

"All right," said Madge, still looking upon him with suspicion. "But Handsome and I will remain with you, Turner."

"That is what I hoped you'd do," replied Nick; but he spoke with a meaning which she did not understand.

They followed the plan suggested by the detective. That is, they returned to the entrance from the valley, and there Nick divided his followers into six parties, thus arranging that four of the parties should contain four searchers each, one of them should contain three, and his own immediate party should consist of himself, with Handsome and Madge.

To the leaders of each of these subparties he gave the necessary directions, with the result that he sent them off as they arrived at their respective galleries, and after a little he found himself alone with the two chiefs of the outlaws.

"There ain't much for us to do now," he said. "There ain't much more searching as we kin do. There's only two galleries left for us to explore 'less we find some hiding place that's remained unknown until now."

"And that isn't likely, is it?" asked Madge. Her voice was still filled with suspicion against him.

"You know as much about that ere as I do," he replied.

But they searched each of the galleries without any result, and Nick finally directed the route so that at last they paused to rest directly in front of the movable rock behind which was the entrance to the place where Patsy was concealed.

And Nick seated himself so that his own back was against that rock, for he did not care to run the chance that Handsome might lean against it hard enough to move it—at least, not until he was in every way prepared for that part of the drama.

Madge was tired by this time, and she showed it. She leaned against the rocky wall and sighed deeply; and Handsome furnished the cue for the next scene—so perfectly that Nick could not have ordered it otherwise if he had tried.

"I'm dry," said Handsome, yawning. "This is dry work, Madge. Don't you think we had better give the thing up for a time and wait. Pat will be starved out after a little. He'll have to come out and get caught."

"If he ain't lost in the galleries," suggested Nick; and Madge replied:

"No; we won't give it up. If you are dry, Handsome, suppose you go to the camp and get something for us all. I wouldn't mind having something myself."

"I'll do it," said Handsome, rising. "Wait here."

He was off like a shot, for now he felt that he knew the route sufficiently well through the caverns to find his way without difficulty; as, indeed, he did. And he had a lantern to light his path.

Nick sat quietly until Handsome was well out of hearing, and then, purposely, he leaned very hard against the rock behind him—so hard that it moved, and he nearly fell upon his back inside the opening.

With a well-simulated cry of surprise, he leaped to his feet, and stood staring, and Madge did the same.

"A secret hidin' place!" cried out the supposed old man—and he pushed the rock farther in, thus making the opening even larger.

Then he stooped forward toward it.

"Hello in there!" he called lustily, for he wished to warn Patsy of what was taking place, and at the same time to instruct him what to do. "Come out of that, you—Pat! There are two of us here, and one is Madge herself. Come out of that!"

"You fool!" exclaimed Madge.

"Come out of that!" repeated the detective, pretending not to hear her. "Come out of that, or we'll come in after you!"

There was no reply, and Nick turned to her.

"Come along," he said. "We'll go inside and find him."

She had a revolver in her hand, and now she stepped quickly forward, for there was nothing of the coward about Black Madge. There was not a thing on earth that she feared.

She stepped forward so quickly that she had passed inside the barrier of rock before Nick—as he intended she should—and then, as he stepped after her, he seized her quickly from behind—seized both her arms, and

pulled them behind her with a suddenness that made her drop her weapon to the rocky floor.

As he pulled her backward, she tried to cry out, but he had anticipated that, and already he had grasped her so that he could press one of his hands for an instant over her mouth, and at the same moment he called out:

"Quick, Patsy! On your life! There isn't an instant to spare!"

And Patsy was ready and fully prepared.

He had approached them through the darkness at the first note of warning from Nick, and was in reality only a few feet distant when they entered the rocky passage; so that when the detective seized upon Madge and pulled her backward, Patsy was ready to leap forward and to give his aid.

When Nick's hand was pressed over her mouth to stop the cry that rose to her lips, Patsy was there to seize her, also; and he did it; and, although she struggled fiercely, she was quickly overpowered, and a gag was thrust into her mouth.

Then they tied her, hand and foot, with cords with which Nick had provided himself, and together they carried her far back into the recess behind the rock.

"There is a big room here," said Patsy. "And it is stocked with provisions, and a stream of pure water trickles through it. One could live here a month without going out."

"Good!" said the detective. "Carry her in there. Then when we have made her safe, we will wait for Handsome, and serve him in the same manner. And after that, I have got a plan which will work the whole thing out to a finish."

Madge was glaring at him venomously all this time, for she could not speak. But her eyes were terrible to see in their utter ferocity.

She knew now what the game was that had been played against her. She knew now that the man she had supposed to be old Bill Turner was all the time no other than Nick Carter himself.

She could have bitten her tongue out with rage and chagrin. She fairly writhed in the ecstasy of her impotent anger.

But they laid her gently upon the rocky floor, where there were some blankets over leaves—it was evident that Bill Turner had used this place as a retreat of his own, and had provided it for that purpose, like a schoolboy who finds a cave and makes a cache—and then Nick spoke to her.

"You see, Madge," he said, "it is all up with you and your gang; or very nearly so. We are going out now to capture Handsome, and bring him here to keep you company. After that I will show you a trick that will make you green with envy, and that will finish up this hobo business of yours once and forever. Come on, Patsy."

They left her there and returned to the entrance.

"Now," said the detective, "there is only one way to make Handsome fall into the trap. We must leave this entrance open for him to discover when he returns. He will first miss us. Then he will see the hole behind the rock. Then he will step forward to look inside. Then no doubt he will call out. I will stand here and remain silent; and then Handsome will do one of two things—he will either come inside to search for Madge and me, or he will set up a yell for the others to come to him."

"Suppose he brings some of the men back with him?" asked Patsy.

"We have got to chance that."

"Well, what are we to do when he steps inside this hole—for he will do that?"

"You stand over there in that niche," replied Nick.

"When he steps inside the very nature of the place will bring his back toward me. I will tap him on the back of the head with my fist and knock him into your arms. You are to grab him with your arms around him, and hold him so that he cannot get at a weapon, and until I can get my fingers on him. That is all. Now, ready and wait."

They had some time to wait; longer than Nick expected, and he began to fear that Handsome would bring some of the men back with him; but at last they saw the glimmer of his light as he approached, and Nick knew by the sounds he heard that Handsome was returning alone.

Presently he appeared. He was calling out softly, for he could not understand why he had not been answered—and the light he carried prevented him from seeing the hole behind the rock until it was directly in front of him.

And then he came to a sudden stop, and gazed at it in astonishment.

"Gee!" Nick heard him exclaim. "Dogged if they haven't found a hole here. And they have gone into it, too. I wonder if that old cuss knew about it all the time?"

He remained in doubt for a moment what to do; and then, as Nick had predicted, he stepped softly forward, and, holding his light aloft, peered through the opening.

But Nick had chosen his place of concealment well, and Handsome could not see him.

Then Handsome called out:

"Madge! Bill! Where the devil are you?"

There was no reply, and he waited a moment before he called again. Then he repeated:

"Madge! Madge!"

When no reply came to this second call, he stood for some time in doubt, as if he thought of calling assistance to him before he entered that dark and unknown place; and once Nick thought he half turned, as if he had decided to summon some of the others.

But he evidently thought better of this, for he turned about resolutely again, and boldly stepped into the opening. Two such steps brought him exactly into the position where the detective wanted him, and as soon as he had achieved it, Nick struck him with his fist.

With a half-articulated cry, Handsome pitched forward and fell into the grasp of Patsy, who was ready for him; and then, when he would have struggled, other arms—Nick's—seized him from behind, and another blow fell upon him, striking him behind the ear, and rendering him half dazed for the moment.

And then Nick, knowing that Patsy could hold him, turned about and closed the rock door of the retreat; and before Handsome had recovered his senses sufficiently to offer any resistance, the two detectives had bound him so securely that he could not move.

"Take his feet," ordered Nick, then. "We will carry him back into that chamber, to keep Madge company."

While they were doing that, Handsome managed to recover his powers of speech—for, now that the rock door was closed, Nick did not think it necessary to gag the man—and his powers of speech in this particular instance were something frightful to listen to.

He was still swearing when they dropped him, none too gently, upon the floor of the cavern not far from Madge; and then Patsy lighted two

bracket lamps with which the place was provided, while Nick smilingly removed the gag from Madge's mouth.

And where Handsome had worn out his vocabulary of curses, Madge took it up, and completed it in masterly style, and there was really nothing for either of the detectives to say for a long time. But her breath was gone after a while, and she lapsed into sullen silence, closing her remarks with the request:

"At least give me something to drink out of that bottle that Handsome went after."

Nick could really do nothing less, and he complied; and the liquor seemed to restore some of her accustomed coolness, for she looked at Nick with an ugly gleam in her black eyes, and said:

"You are Nick Carter again, aren't you?"

"Again?" replied Nick, laughing. "I was always Nick Carter. I was so interested in that last interview I had with you, Madge, that I couldn't stay away; and now, when you condemned my assistant to death, you hastened the reckoning. That is all."

"I'll condemn you to death yet—and watch you die, too!" was her retort.

CHAPTER XVI.

NICK MAKES BAD MEDICINE.

Handsome had also recovered from his paroxysm of rage by this time, for he was one who had the gift of knowing when he was beaten, and the logic to accept a situation when he knew that it could not be avoided.

"I reckon you've got the drop on us, Carter," he said. "You've played the game mighty well, too. There is one thing about it that I would like to know, though, if you will tell me. Will you?"

"What is it?" asked the detective.

"I want to know if you have been old Bill Turner from the beginning. I want to know if it was you whose acquaintance I made in the first place, the time I was pulled out of the hole in the rocks, or if it was old Bill himself."

"That was the old man himself," replied Nick, smiling.

"And the second time I met him; was that him—or you?"

"That was the old man, also."

"Well, all that I can say is that you have played the part so devilish well that I find it hard to believe even now that you are not what you appear to be."

"You're a fool!" said Madge spitefully.

"Oh, I admit the impeachment, Madge. There isn't any doubt of it. I'm a fool, all right."

"And you are up against it rather hard just now, Handsome; you and Madge," said Nick.

"I know that, too. I'm no fool as far as that is concerned. What are you going to do about the rest of the gang?"

"I'm going to capture the whole bunch," was Nick's rather astonishing reply.

"I don't see how you are going to do it," retorted Handsome. "There is a cold hundred of them, all told—and every entrance to the cave is guarded. You attended to that yourself."

"Certainly, I did; because I foresaw this very moment."

"Well, all that I can say is that you can see a cussed sight farther into a stone fence than I can."

"I'll show you how it is done, if you are interested," replied the detective. "But, first, I am afraid that I will have to ask you to step out here a moment, into the other part of the cave, always remembering that if you make any kind of a break, down you go with a cracked skull;" and Nick leaned forward and loosened the cords around his ankles.

"Oh, I know when my hands are in the air, Carter. If I make any breaks it will be because I think I see a chance of winning. What do you want?"

He rose stiffly to his feet as he asked the question; and Nick looked him in the eye as he replied:

"I want you to remember, in the first place, that I am more than twice or three times as strong as you are, and that if you offer to give me any trouble I shall hurt you; and hurt you so badly, too, that you won't get over it right away. I am going to take you into the other part of this

cavern, toward the door where we entered. I am going to free your hands, and then I shall ask you to put on these old togs that Turner has left here for a change of clothing in case he got wet—for I want these that I am wearing for Patsy. After you have made the change I shall tie you up again, and then you will see—what you will see. But, remember, if you refuse to obey me on the instant that I give an order, down you go, and I will take the clothing off your senseless body, instead of letting you do it, and keep well. Now, are you ready?"

"Yes."

Nick took him into the adjoining part of the cave, and held the light on him while he made the necessary change; for Nick had found some extra clothing of Turner's in the cave; and when that was done he tied Handsome up again, more securely than ever, and placed him on the floor again.

"Now, Patsy," he said, "you and I will make a change. You will play the part of old Turner, and I will play the part of Handsome. It is necessary for what we have to do."

Nick first dressed himself in the outer clothes that Handsome had removed; and then he sent Patsy into the other part of the cave to put on the clothing he had taken off—the suit that he had worn as old Turner; and, while Patsy was making the change, he was himself busily engaged in removing the white beard and hair that he had been wearing.

It will not be necessary to describe in detail this operation; it is sufficient to say that the two detectives worked steadily for a long time; and that when at last they were through with what they were doing, Nick had assumed the personality of Handsome, and Patsy was transformed into what Nick had been—old Bill Turner.

When everything was in readiness, he saw to it once more that the bonds which held his two prisoners were sufficiently secure, and that there was no possibility of their escaping; and he went so far as to fasten them to

the opposite walls, so that they could not crawl within reach of each other, and make use of their teeth; and then he turned to Patsy, who was now, to all outward appearance, old Bill Turner.

"Come along, Bill," he said, exactly imitating the voice of Handsome—so that Handsome grinned in spite of himself. "We have got a lot to do yet, and it will be daylight before we know it."

They passed outside then, into the corridor of the cavern, and when Nick had shut the big rock in place over the entrance, he wedged the small stone under it, so that it could not be moved from the inside.

"There," he said. "Even if they should get loose, which is not at all likely, they could not get out. And if they yell themselves hoarse, nobody could hear them. Come on. We've got a lot of work cut out for us."

"What is there to do first?" asked Patsy.

"The first thing is to return to the cabins in the valley, and find out what time it is. Oh, there is a watch in those clothes. Look at it. What time is it?"

"Half-past two," replied Patsy, imitating the broken voice of the old man to perfection.

"That's good, Patsy. I refer to your imitation. You will not have to use it much—possibly not at all; but it is as well to be perfect in your part all the same. I think we will have time enough for what we have to do if we hurry."

He led the way rapidly then, back to the valley, where some of the searchers had already returned, and he found them grouped around the exit, when they issued from the cave.

But when they attempted to address him, believing him to be Handsome, he returned no reply, for he had seen Handsome ignore them utterly many times; but it was Cremation Mike who stepped forward in front of

them as they approached the cabin in which Madge was supposed to live.

"Any luck?" he demanded surlily.

"No," replied Nick, stopping for a moment.

"Look here, Handsome, if that fellow is gone for good, do you suppose that Madge will do what she said she would?"

"What was that, Mike?"

"Hang me in his place?"

"I shouldn't wonder if she did."

"Say, Handsome, can't you say a word for me with her? Where is she? Can I see her?"

"You had better keep away from her," suggested Nick.

"No; I want to see her. Take me to her, will you?"

"All right. Come along," replied the detective, and so Cremation Mike fell in behind them, and followed them into the cabin where Madge was supposed to be.

But they were no sooner inside the house with the door closed than Nick wheeled in his tracks, and grasped Mike by the throat, and then struck him with his fist over the temple. The result was that Cremation Mike sank to the floor without a sound, and was speedily bound and gagged.

"That's one," said the detective grimly. "There are a good many more, Patsy."

"Do you expect to get them all, one by one, in that way?" asked Patsy. "It will take a week to do that."

"No; I have a better plan than that. Wait."

Nick knew of Madge's fondness for trapdoors, and also that she always kept a large supply of liquors on hand with which sometimes she treated her men, or some of them. He had no doubt that somewhere in that cabin he would not only find the liquors he wanted, but also drugs.

There was a trapdoor in the floor of the largest room in the cabin, and under it was a shallow cellar wherein were several cases of liquors. The robbery of freight cars had always kept the hoboes well supplied with such articles.

"Now, I'm going to make the hoboes a punch," he said to Patsy. He was searching through a cupboard while he spoke, and from there he produced a large bottle of laudanum. "I will have to use this," he continued. "It is the only thing here which will do at all, and as it has an excessively bitter taste, I will have to make a punch in order to conceal it. But it will do the work I want done better and more safely than anything else."

"You'll have to use a washtub for the punch, to make enough for all of them," said Patsy. "And is there enough laudanum?"

"Plenty; and there is a couple of pails. They will do as well as a tub. Now help me. We have lemons, and sugar, and everything that we require, here in this cupboard. But first, let's drop Cremation Mike into the cellar with the cases."

They did that, and replaced the trapdoor; then they sliced lemons—all that they could find; they found a pot of cold tea, and this they dumped into the mess with the laudanum; and upon all this, bottle after bottle of the whisky was poured into the pails until they were filled to the brim.

"Now, Patsy," said the detective, "remember that you are old Bill Turner. I want you to go out among the men right now, and tell them that Madge and Handsome have fixed them all up a punch, and if they will form in line and pass in front of the door of this cabin, each one of them can have two drinks of it. And it would be a good idea if you should act as if

you had already taken your own two—or several. It will give them confidence."

"I can do it," replied Patsy, and he went out.

After a little Nick heard the murmur of voices before the cabin, and he stepped to the door and opened it; and then he found that the men, without an exception, save those who were on guard at different places—he found that eighty men had formed in line, and were ready for the treat that had been promised them.

He carried out the two pails and stood them on the porch; and then with a dipper in one hand and a goblet in the other, he called out:

"Come up slow, now; one by one. Don't be in haste. Remember there are two drinks each, for you, and no more. These two pails will just about do it. I'm doing the trick for Black Madge, who happens to be busy just now."

And so they began the procession past him; and so he doled out the concoction he had arranged for them, and watched them gulp it down with evident relish; and he called out when he served the first drink:

"The orders are that each one of you, as soon as you have had your two drinks, shall go to your quarters and turn in. You are wanted to rest up, so that we can begin this search again, and find that fellow we are after. Come on, now. When you have taken your medicine, go to your bunks and turn in—all of you!"

And they came. Then they took their medicine, and so nicely had Nick calculated the quantity that would be required that there was scarcely a pint of the concoction left when they were through.

Many of them stopped long enough to beg for a third drink of it, and only once did Nick grant that request—to a big fellow for whom two might not be sufficient.

And within thirty minutes after that last one had passed the porch, that camp was as quiet as a church.

CHAPTER XVII.

A WHOLESALE ROUND-UP.

Patsy," said the detective, when they reëntered the cabin, after watching their punch consumed almost to the dregs, "this is about the biggest capture I was ever in."

"But we are not through yet, chief," replied the assistant, stroking the white beard he wore so naturally that Nick laughed aloud. "There are sixteen more men at liberty yet, and we have got the whole bunch to tie up. Don't forget that there are four men stationed at each of the outside entrances to——"

"Oh, I haven't forgotten it. We will serve them in the same way. All we have to do is to manufacture one more pail of punch. So here goes. And as for tying them up, that will hardly be necessary."

"Why?"

"They are good for twelve hours of solid sleep at the very least. Many of them will not waken in twenty-four hours."

"And maybe some of them will never wake up. How is that?"

"It is a chance that we had to take; but by restricting them to two drinks each, I figured that there would be no danger. No; I think we are all right.

Now, help me make this extra pail of punch. After that we will carry it through the cavern to the different parties of four each."

"Suppose they get suspicious, and won't drink it?"

"No danger of that, my lad."

When the punch was made, they divided it into two lots, each carrying half, and, thus equipped, they again entered the cavern, this time just as daylight was beginning to appear.

The first party they selected to serve was the one farthest away, and the detective discovered that they were grumbling because they had not been relieved.

But when he appeared with the pail of punch, and told them what had happened—that every one had been served with the same thing—they forgot their sorrows and had their share as the others had taken theirs.

And here, in order to make doubly sure, Nick had given each of the drinks a larger dose of the sleeping draught than he had served in the valley. As soon as the men had drunk what was given them, and had been refused more, he left them, followed by Patsy, and returned through the cave to another entrance.

And here again the operation was repeated in the same manner, an idea of suspicion never once entering the head of any of the men; they were far too eager for the drink which the thoughtfulness of their mistress had provided for them.

"They'll be suspicious when they begin to feel drowsy all at once," suggested Patsy, as they moved away.

"Let them," replied Nick. "We won't be there, and not one of them will be able to go very far before he drops in a stupor. I have fixed it, all right."

They found the second party as eager as the first, and one of them already the worse for too many drinks from a bottle he had had in his pocket; but they took the medicine that Nick portioned out to them as the others had done, and they in turn were left alone to drop off to sleep as they would; for they had been awake all night, and now it was broad daylight. They figured that they deserved some sleep.

At the third entrance the four men were already asleep—all but one of them, and he was drowsing; and Nick, in his character of Handsome, pretended to be angry at first. He pretended to refuse to give them the punch that had been sent to them until they begged so hard that he finally relented.

"Why," said Patsy, when they left them, and took their way toward the fourth, and last, place—the hole under the Dog's Nose, near the place where Handsome and Madge were prisoners, "it's all as easy as living on a farm."

"And not half so interesting," laughed the detective.

They walked past the movable rock behind which the two prisoners were confined without so much as devoting a glance to it, for they were both intent upon accomplishing this last installment of capture through the medium of the laudanum; and here they found the four men who were on duty, just about ready to mutiny because they had not been relieved.

But the presence of Handsome—or the man they believed to be Handsome—quieted them at once, for they stood in wholesome dread of him and his anger; and when they understood what had been brought to them, they were ready for anything.

And so it was that in their turns they took their medicine as the others had done. When they had swallowed it, Nick said to them:

"Stretch out, now, you fellows, where you are. I'll let you sleep for a while, at least. I'm going to sit here and smoke. I am tired myself. Turner, sit down. We'll keep watch here for a spell."

The men did not require a second invitation, but speedily took advantage of the permission—and it was surprising how soon the laudanum took effect upon them.

Ten minutes had not elapsed before the four were sleeping soundly, and snoring as if they never expected to awake again.

"I think we can go now," said Nick, at last, rising.

"What is the next trick to be done?" asked Patsy.

"Let me see," replied Nick. "It's thirty miles from here to Calamont. How far is it to the railway track in a direct line? That is the way you came, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How far is it?"

"About four miles, possibly. I can make it in an hour."

"Then skip. This is the nearest point to start from. Get to the track as soon as you can. Flag the first train that comes along, no matter what it is. Get aboard it, and go to the first station. Get off there, and use the telegraph operator. Have him wire to Mr. Cobalt, the president of the road, exactly what has happened. Ask Cobalt to send a special train to us from the nearest point. We will want about twenty officers to take charge of all these prisoners, and he had better send along some chains with padlocks on them. You can figure that out yourself. We will want to make chain gangs of these men, so that they can walk to the railway, but so that they are chained together and cannot escape. You've got the idea?"

"Yes."

"Go, then, and see how quickly you can get the officers here, and we can get this crew away from here."

"And you?"

"I'll stay here. Skip, now. Don't talk any more."

"Have I got to carry these whiskers with me?" grinned Patsy.

"You'd better not stop to remove them now. I put them on to stay. Go!"

And Patsy went.

Nick remained where he was for a while, thinking deeply, and altogether satisfied with what he had accomplished; but after a little he rose, and took his way back into the cave, intending to see what Handsome and Madge were doing, and if they were making any effort to free themselves.

But after he had reëntered the cave, and had covered the twenty rods that intervened between it and the movable rock, he stopped in astonishment and stared.

The rock was pushed wide open.

With a bound he darted forward and entered the place, but only to find that Madge and Handsome had both disappeared. Their bonds were lying upon the floor of the cavern, but they were no longer there themselves.

Nick did not wait to see more than that then.

He turned away on a run, and darted through the galleries with all the speed he could summon under the circumstances—and he came out into the valley, where the sun was shining, directly behind his two escaped prisoners, for they had not preceded him by more than a minute, evidently.

With one wild spring he was upon them, and as Handsome turned to defend himself, Nick hit him with his fist, so that he sent him reeling across the grass, where he fell senseless to the earth.

But in the meantime Madge had turned with a scream of rage, and when she saw the real Handsome fall helpless, she broke into a run toward her

own cottage, for she had no weapon to use now, Nick having deprived them both of their guns.

But the detective ran after her, and, just as she was about to leap upon the porch, he succeeded in seizing her, and in pulling her back again toward him.

She turned upon him then like a fury; but with a laugh he sprang under her extended arms, and seized her around the waist; and then he lifted her from her feet, and, still laughing, he ran across the grass to the cabin in which Patsy had once been a prisoner, and in another moment he had tossed her inside, closed the door and fastened it.

For a long time he could hear her storming in there, but he had to hurry back to Handsome, who was still down and out when he got to him, but who presently revived.

But he had all the fight taken out of him, and he allowed himself to be bound again securely, after which Nick led him to Madge's cabin, and tied him to one of the rustic chairs on the porch.

Including Black Madge and her first lieutenant, Handsome, there were one hundred and two prisoners turned over to be dealt with by the law when Patsy returned to the place in the hills, having piloted the officers who were sent by special train to complete the capture.

Black Madge did not see the detective again to speak to him; but she sent him a note, in which she said:

"I haven't done with you yet, Nick Carter. I will never forgive you for fooling me as you did. I shall manage to get my liberty again, somehow, some time, and when I do, it will be for the purpose of wreaking vengeance on you. And I will get even some day, never fear."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLACK MADGE'S THREAT.

Nick Carter had entirely forgotten Black Madge's threat when he was forcibly reminded of it one morning by the following letter which he found on his breakfast table:

"Nick Carter: One month ago—how time flies—I wrote to you that I hadn't done with you yet; that I would never forgive you, and that I would get even some day.

"That was a month ago. I thought when I wrote that it might take a year—but they are easy marks in this State.

"It was my hope after you captured me and all my followers, that I would have a chance to see you again, and to talk to you before I was taken away to prison. You would say probably that I wanted to boast; for a threat, after all, is only another kind of boasting. But it wasn't so, Nick Carter; I wanted to tell you what you had succeeded in doing; and this is it:

"You have succeeded in creating in me a passion which supersedes all others in my nature—the passion of hatred. Twice now you have foiled me; twice you have been successful in arresting me, and the latter of these two times you not only destroyed the organization which I had created, and rendered it utterly impotent for my future uses, but you destroyed almost at one blow every ambition that I had through that organization and by reason of it.

"You didn't know that, and you couldn't appreciate it; and it wouldn't matter at all to you if you had; neither has it anything to do with the purport of this letter.

"I know you will say that I am a fool to take the trouble to warn you, but I would be less than a woman, and much less than the bad woman I am, if I did not take this opportunity of exulting over the chance that is now promised to me to get square with you.

"Heretofore my every effort has been centred upon playing on my fellow men; heretofore I have had only two thoughts in pursuing my career; one was to create an organization of which I was the supreme head, and the other was to secure by the operation of that organization all the money that it was possible to obtain.

"I have always been a thief with a system. My robberies have all been committed after careful planning; you know that because of the one you helped to commit yourself. But now I have only one ambition left—to get square with you. I haven't decided yet how I shall do it, or when, or where it shall be done. If I had so decided I would not tell you, so it makes no difference.

"But I have been a hard student, Nick Carter, of many things. I have had good instructors in the science of mixing and using poisons; there is no person living to-day, man or woman—yourself included—who is a better marksman than I am with firearms; there is no person, man or woman, who is more adept to-day in the use of all weapons than I am. This is not boasting; it is fact.

"Moreover, I have the power to appear in many guises—disguises you might call them. In one or more of them—perhaps in many of them—I shall appear to you, and when you are least expecting it I shall strike.

"Don't think by that that I mean to strike you dead. That would not be making you suffer enough; but I shall find other and better ways in which to strike—ways that will make you suffer and realize what you did when you made me your enemy, and made me hate you as I do.

"And another thing; I have already set to work to bring together, as rapidly as I can find them, people who have criminal records and who

have reason to hate you as I do; people whom you have pursued as you have pursued me; those whom you have sent to prison; those whose careers you have interrupted; those you have threatened; and those who have cause for holding a grudge against you.

"I have sought many of those, and I have found many. I am still seeking others, and I shall find more; and when I have got together enough of them, and have selected from that number those whom I deem most available for my purpose and competent to carry out my directions as I shall give them, I shall organize them into a Band of Hatred, the sole object of which shall be your undoing and, ultimately, your death.

"You have preyed too long already upon that class of humanity to which I belong, and from our standpoint your position is much the same as is our position from yours.

"You know me well enough, Nick Carter, to know that from this moment forward you will never be safe from danger for one moment of your life; whether you are sleeping or waking; whether you are afloat or ashore; whether you are quartered in the seclusion of your own study at home, or are abroad upon the streets of the city.

"You know that I do not threaten idly. You know that I am a woman with a purpose. You know that I am intelligent, educated, and determined. You know that I am a woman to be feared.

"I have thought this matter all over, and decided upon it during those hours when I was locked in the cabin up there in the hills, after you had drugged the men of my company, and succeeded in capturing us all.

"When I was taken to prison I knew that it would be only a short time before I would be able to make good my escape. How I have succeeded in accomplishing it does not matter. I have found one key in my experience that never fails to open prison locks, if it is properly applied; the fact that it is made of gold is sufficient explanation, and gold I had in plenty, for I have always been successful, and even now I have hoards

concealed in different places which will supply me with funds more than sufficient to carry out to the bitter end this campaign of vengeance upon which I have determined.

"I think that is all.

"I shall leave here for New York City an hour after this letter is put in the mail. When you will see me first I do not know.

Black Madge."

The detective read this remarkable letter twice from beginning to end, and then he passed it in silence across the table to Chick, who was seated opposite to him.

And Chick also read it twice in silence, and as silently returned it. Nick, realizing that Ten-Ichi and Patsy would also fall under the sweeping hatred of Black Madge, tossed it over to them with the direction that they read it also.

There was not one among them who felt like making any comment upon the letter, or its contents, at least until their chief had spoken; but presently, with a gesture to Chick, which meant that he was to follow him as soon as he had finished his breakfast, the detective left the table and went to his study.

It was only a few moments after that when Chick entered the room, smiling.

"I hope, Nick," he said, dropping into a chair near the window and lighting a cigar, "that you enjoyed the reading of that letter from Madge?"

The detective was silent a moment before he replied, and then quite slowly he said:

"So far as I am personally concerned, Chick, the letter or its contents has no more effect upon me than the snapping of your fingers, but I will confess that I am in some dread concerning what she might do to you, and to Ten-Ichi and Patsy."

Chick leaned back in his chair and laughed aloud.

"If you will excuse me for saying so," he remarked, "that is utter nonsense. Of course, the boys downstairs and I are quite capable of taking care of ourselves."

"I don't doubt that," said Nick, "but that is not exactly the point."

"What is, then?"

"You have forgotten one part of her letter," said Nick.

"What part?"

"That part wherein she speaks about making me suffer, rather than attempting to do me physical harm."

"Oh! I haven't forgotten it."

"Do you understand what she means by that, Chick?"

"Certainly."

"Let me hear if you do."

"Well, she probably means that it would be her first effort to make you suffer by injuring those whom you love—in other words, by doing something or other to one of us. But forewarned is forearmed, and, anyhow, I don't think it behooves any of us to be afraid of a woman."

"This is a case," said Nick, "where a woman is much more dangerous than a man. A man would fight

out in the open; a woman will fight in the shadow; or, at least, such a woman as that will. She is a pretty bad one, Chick, and a grave foe."

Chick nodded.

"It is always best," continued the detective, "to give your enemy or your adversaries credit for every advantage they possess. Black Madge is a wonderfully smart woman, and is unprincipled and implacable as she is smart. She will halt at nothing to carry out her design of vengeance, and just as sure as you are sitting there, Chick, we will presently feel the surety of that threat."

Chick flicked the ashes from his cigar, and then strode across the room to the window, where he stood for a moment looking out.

"I don't see exactly what we are going to do to head her off before she begins," he said presently.

"There is nothing to do," replied Nick gloomily.

"Upon my word," said Chick, laughing, "one would think that you were more than usually affected by that letter from Madge. Do you really take it so seriously as all that?"

"I take it seriously," replied the detective, "because I so well understand what the woman means, and she means just what she says. Instead of going on evenly and living the life we have been living, we must not be for an instant off our guard from this day on, until she is again behind the bars, and I hope the next time I arrest her it will be within the limits of the State of New York, where I can place a watch over her so that she will not escape."

"And I hope so, too," said Chick.

"And now, in the meantime," continued Nick, smiling, "since we have this letter and know what she is about to do, I think we will meet her

halfway, and not wait for her to open the ball. Since she is at liberty, we will set about capturing her at once."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BAND OF HATRED.

Down on the East Side of New York, in Rivington Street, and some distance east of the Bowery, on the second floor of one of the oldest buildings in the city, a remarkable meeting was being held during the night that followed the receipt of Madge's letter by Nick Carter.

In a room on this floor, which was brilliantly lighted by four gas jets blazing from the chandelier, nine people were seated. They were gathered along two sides of the room, in which was a centre table, and behind this table was Black Madge.

Before her on the table were various sheets of letter paper, which she had turned from a pad one after another as she made notes upon them, and in her hand she held a pencil which ever and anon flew rapidly over the paper while she recorded such information concerning those who were present with her as she cared to remember.

They had been present in that room for upward of an hour, and during that time Madge had questioned each one of the eight who faced her concerning the statements they had made, and which she had noted.

Now she leaned back in her chair, and, holding one of the sheets of paper in her hand, she said: "Stand up, Scar-faced Johnny, and answer the questions I shall ask you."

One of them, a short, stocky, red-headed, brutalized being, who was almost as broad as he was long, leaped to his feet, thrust his hands

deeply into his pockets, and with his chin stuck forward aggressively, waited.

"You hate Nick Carter, do you, Johnny?" Madge asked.

"I hate him like poison."

"And you would kill him if you could?"

"I'd cut his throat in half a minute if I was sure of not being caught."

"Tell me again why you hate him so."

"Ain't he sent me twice to prison? Once for four years and once for three. And the last time he done it didn't he hand me a welt alongside of the jaw that I'll never forget? A man can't hit me like that and have me love him afterward. You just show me the way to do it, Black Madge, and I'll lay him out cold—so cold that he'll never get over it again. All I want is a chance."

"All right," said Madge, "take your seat.

"Now, Slippery Al, you stand up. What's your line of graft, Slippery?"

Slippery, who was tall, and sallow, and lean, and unkempt, and who looked consumptive and otherwise unwholesome, grinned sheepishly, as he replied:

"I reckon my name ought to answer that question. I slips in and I slips out where I can and when I can, and picks up anything that's lying around."

Madge laughed scornfully.

"You don't look as if you had sense enough to hate anybody or anything," she said.

"Oh, I hate Nick Carter, right enough," was the unhesitating reply.

"Why do you hate him?"

"Because he sent my father and my mother and my two brothers to prison, and they're all there now, and they weren't doing a thing that interfered with him in any way."

"What were they doing?" asked Madge.

"Well, if you want to know it straight, Black Madge, they was running a little counterfeit plant of their own—making dimes and quarters and a few half dollars for some of us to blow in when we couldn't find the real rhino."

"Running a counterfeit plant, eh?"

"That's it, marm."

"And Nick Carter sent them all to prison, did he?"

"He did that."

"How does it happen that he didn't send you along with them?"

"Well, I managed to slip out just in time," said Slippery, with one of his sheepish grins; "but he sent a bullet after me when I was running away that singed the hair over my right ear, and taking it all in all I hate him about as much as anybody."

"Not enough to kill him if I should ask you to do it, do you?"

"Well, Madge, when it comes to killing, that ain't in my line; but if you want me to lead him on somehow where somebody else could do the job, I think I'd be about the covey that could do it."

"That'll do for you. Sit down, Slippery."

"What's your name?" she added to the man who was next him.

A dark, beetle-browed, heavy-jawed, coarse-featured man, who looked as if he was as powerful as a giant, rose slowly to his feet, and replied in a surly tone, and with an ugly glitter in his eyes:

"I have got about forty names; leastwise, the police say I have; but they as knows me best calls me Bob for short; sometimes they fixes it up a little by calling it Surly Bob. But I think that Bob will do for you."

"What have you got against Nick Carter, Surly Bob?" asked Madge, smiling. She liked the looks of this hard-featured individual. He was just brutal enough in his appearance to satisfy her ideas of what a man should be.

Bob deliberately took a huge chew of tobacco into his mouth before he replied, and then, with a slow and almost bovine indifference, he responded:

"I don't know as it makes much difference to you, Black Madge, what I hate him for as long as I do hate him, and I'm bound to get square with him some day, whether I do it in connection with this organization that you're getting together or on my own hook without the help of any of you," and he glanced defiantly around. "It's enough that I do hate him. He's done enough to me to make me hate him. It's enough that if I had him alone in this room to-night one of us would never leave it alive unless he got the best of me without killing me, for I would certainly do him if I got half a chance.

"But I'll tell you one thing about him that maybe it will do some of you good to hear, for I give you fair warning that you want to give Nick Carter a wide berth unless you can manage somehow to catch him foul. He's about as strong as three horses, and if he ever succeeds in getting his grip on you you're gone. I'm about as tough as they make them, but I'm a wee baby in Nick Carter's hands, and don't any of you forget it."

"Tell us the story," said Madge.

"Oh, it ain't no story; it's just a short account. We ran into each other once near the front door of a bank I had gone into after hours and without the permission of the president and board of directors. When I picked myself up from the middle of the street after he grabbed me there was a crack in the top of my

skull which didn't get well for three months. That's all I've got to say about it, but I want to add this: If that fellow Slippery Al, who says killing ain't in his line, but leading astray is, wants to bring Nick Carter my way, and will fetch him along so as I can get him foul, I'll fix him for keeps, and no questions asked."

And Surly Bob sat down.

He had no sooner taken his seat than the individual next to him sprang up without waiting to be asked to do so. If you had encountered this individual along Broadway or on Fifth Avenue in New York City, you might not have devoted a second glance to him; but if you had, and still had not studied him closely, you would not have thought him other than a gentleman.

His features were handsome or would have been handsome were it not for the crafty and shifty expression of his eyes and the otherwise insincerity that was manifest in his face. Among his companions of the underworld he was known far and near as Gentleman Jim.

By profession he was what is known as a confidence man, although it was said of him that he had the courage to take any part that might be required of him in preying upon the world at large.

He had been known to assist, and to do it well, at a bank robbery. He had once lived for some time in

Chicago as a highwayman. It was said of him that in his youth he had begun his career of crime by rustling cattle in the far West, and that he was as quick and as sure with a gun as any "bad man" of that region.

His attire was immaculate and in the height of fashion. He was clean shaven, and he wore eyeglasses which gave to him somewhat of a professional look, and which he had been heard to say were excellent things to hide the expression in a man's eyes.

In stature he was tall, rather broad, and extremely well built. In short, Madge looked upon him when he rose with undoubted admiration in her eyes, as if she believed that here was a man who could be anything he chose to be in the criminal world.

When he spoke it was in an evenly modulated tone of voice which might have done excellent service in a drawing-room; and, moreover, his voice was pleasant to listen to.

"I suppose you would like to hear from me, as well as from the others, Madge," he said slowly. "I haven't got very much to say, except that I don't take much stock in boasted hatreds. Where I was raised, and where I began my career—and I am not particularly proud of that career—when we hated anybody we rarely said much about it, but I will say this to you, and to the others who are here: I am very glad that this organization is being perfected. I am very glad that some concerted action is to be taken against this man, Nick Carter, who has come pretty near putting us all out of business. You all know who I am, and some of you have got a pretty good idea what I am. Nick Carter knows about as much about me as any of you, which, after all is said, is next to nothing at all. But I have been on a still hunt for Mr. Nick Carter for some time, and when I get him in a position which Surly Bob calls foul, I shan't wait to send to any of you for assistance. I'll do the rest myself."

"And now you," said Madge, fixing her eyes upon the individual who was seated next to Gentleman Jim "Rise in your place and tell us your name, and make us a little speech, as the others have done."

"My name is Cummings—Fly Cummings, I'm called. Some of the bunch here knows me and some don't. Those that do know me don't need to be told anything about me, and those that don't know me are just as well off. I'm in business for myself, and always have been. The world owes me a living, and it's been paying it pretty regular ever since I was sixteen years old, and I'm now coming sixty-two. I'm like the others here in one respect: I've got a grudge against the man we've been talking about. I've never been able to make him feel it, because I've always fought mighty shy of him rather than get within his reach; but when I heard that this here movement had been started going by you, Madge, and the word was passed around among the guns downtown that you wanted a few of us that hated Nick Carter to come to the captain's office and form a little organization, it struck me that it was just about the right thing to do. I've heard what Surly Bob had to say, and I know that Surly isn't the sort of chap that's in the habit of talking through his hat. If Surly Bob had it in for me I'd patronize the New York Central Railroad, and take a train out of town right away.

"I've heard what Gentleman Jim had to say, and if Jim was looking for my gore to-night, I'd take a steamer across the ocean or commit suicide, because I'd know I couldn't get away from him in any other way.

"I've heard what Slippery Al had to say, and while Slippery ain't of much account, he's about the nastiest toad that ever picked a pocket, and I wouldn't care to have him down on me.

"And as for Scar-faced Johnny, well, Johnny is a bad one, too. I ain't making any threats particularly, Madge, but I'm willing to join this organization, or I wouldn't be here, and I want to say now that when you're fixing up the business, and arrange for the signals so that we can

summons each other when we want them, I'll do my part to the tune of compound interest; and I guess that'll be about all from me."

The sixth man of the party, who was the next to get upon his feet, had the stamp of prison life all over him. His face bespoke the pallor which is acquired in no other place in the world, and the vicious, shifty, sneaking gleam in his eyes spoke well of the craftiness which is the result of long confinement under the domination of brutal guards and turnkeys.

So recently had he escaped from prison, apparently, that his hair was still cropped short to his skull, and one almost expected when looking at him to see the stripes of prison garb upon him.

"I am Joe Cuthbert," he said slowly, in a tone so low that it could scarcely be heard. "I wouldn't have come here to-night at all if I hadn't been assured on the level that it would be perfectly safe to do so. I don't think there is any one of you in this room except Madge herself who knows me, but you will all hear from me later on as sure as I'm alive and can escape arrest.

"You may have been told since you came here that I have just escaped from prison, or if you haven't been told it, and know how to read, you have probably seen the rewards for my recapture. You will know, too, that I was sent up for croaking another chap, or, as they call it in the courts, for murder. I want you all to know that I served eight years. Eight years of hell, and that I've come out of there with the determination of getting square with the man that sent me up. That man was Nick Carter; and that's all I've got to say."

There was a moment of utter silence after this announcement, which had in it many of the elements of the dramatic.

There was not a person in that room who had not seen the inside of a prison, and many of them had served as many as four years, while others had been in prison many times for short terms.

But to have just escaped from prison after having been confined for eight long years seemed to them the climax of the possibilities of hatred.

But the moment passed, and Madge fixed her eyes upon the seventh of the group, who slowly rose to his feet and said:

"After what we've just heard, Madge, it doesn't seem that anything that I can say can add to the intensity of feeling that pervades this distinguished assembly. I regard it as quite an honor to be among those who know so well how to hate. As for me, I have also been inside a prison, to which this man Nick Carter sent me. I had been mixed up in a little diamond robbery from one of the big firms in this town. I don't know but maybe some of you heard about it; it was called the taking of the pear-shaped diamonds, and at the time that happened I was in love with a very beautiful girl, and was outwardly leading a very respectable life. It's enough for me to say now that when the exposure that followed Nick Carter's investigation of that case, and through it the exposure of all my previous criminal record, which before that time I had been able to conceal, the girl went back on me, and would have nothing more to do with me. Now she is married to another man, and while I don't blame her any, I do blame the man that exposed me, and if any of you people that are gathered here can help me in getting square with him I'll be eternally grateful. My name is Eugene Maxwell."

There was only one other individual left in this collection who had not as yet spoken, and now, although Madge fixed her eyes instantly upon him, he remained in his chair as he was, with immovable, sphinxlike countenance and gloomy eyes. He was a tall, spare, rather well-dressed figure, when he rose at last in reply to her spoken request, and he stood, half leaning upon a cane which he held in his two hands, and bent a little toward her as he spoke.

"I haven't any name, so far as anybody knows," he said slowly, and with distinct and deliberate enunciation. "It has pleased my friends always to bestow a title upon me. Until to-night I have always worked alone, and

have rarely made myself known to any of the inhabitants of the underworld, and if any of you here have ever happened to be told about The Parson, you will know who I am."

There was a distinct stir in the room when he uttered this name or title, for The Parson had always been more or less a mystery, and one that was much envied by thieves generally. He was a confidence man of the higher type; the sort of man who would go into strange cities or villages or communities, and represent himself to be a professional man; sometimes a minister; sometimes a priest; again a rabbi; and it was his graft to solicit and collect contributions for charitable purposes upon forged recommendations and letters which he had prepared in advance.

His success in this line had been enormous, and his work had always been done in the dark and alone, until six years before this particular occasion, having done it once too often, Nick Carter had trailed him down and captured him.

He continued:

"I was always very successful in my line of graft until Nick Carter got after me, and while I didn't get quite so long a term as our friend Cuthbert, I was sent up for five years, and served four years and three months of it. I want to say to you now that every night and every morning of my life during those four years and three months I cursed Nick Carter and everybody and everything that belonged to him. That's why I'm here. I take part in this little scheme that Madge has concocted to down that fellow with the greatest pleasure I have ever known. If you should happen to be in want of funds any time——"

"I'll supply the funds," interrupted Madge.

"All the same, if you should happen to be in want of funds at any time, all you've got to do is to whisper it to The Parson and I'll put my hand down in my pocket and supply the dollars, for I've got a few left, and I know where there are a lot more to be obtained."

He resumed his seat slowly, rested his chin upon the head of his cane between his hands, and the gloomy look came over his face again like a mask.

And now Madge stood up behind the table, resting her hands upon it, and leaning a little bit forward as she spoke.

"I'm a proud woman, my friends," she said. "I'm a young woman, too, being not yet twenty-four, and a good hater. I am part Spanish and part French. I was raised in Paris, and learned all that I know about my business over there. The first time that I ever saw Nick Carter in my life was in the office of the Prefecture of Police in the room of the Chief of the Secret Service. I was seventeen years old at the time when the chief had sent for me to question me about the death of a woman which had occurred in the house where I lived on the floor above me, and about which, fortunately, I knew absolutely nothing.

"But Nick Carter came into the chief's office while I was there. I had only a fleeting glance of him at the time. I left the room almost as soon as he entered it. I did not see him again for five years, at which time he came in disguise to the thieves' headquarters where I was staying. I recognized him that time by his eyes, but nevertheless he captured me and sent me to jail.

"I escaped from that jail before I came to trial, and did it through the help of my friends. Somewhat later than that he hunted me down a second time, but I escaped, and I have sworn now to be even with him, and that is why I have brought you here together. You will please to stand up now, raise your right hands, and repeat after me in taking the oath of The Band of Hatred."

CHAPTER XX.

A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS.

A strange series of accidents began the night of the day following the receipt of the letter, and Nick Carter had no doubt whatever that it was the first act to be played in the drama of vengeance which Black Madge had inaugurated against them.

It was rather a simple thing of itself, and did no damage to amount to anything. The fact was that during the night some malicious person had placed under the front steps in the areaway of his house a barrel that had been filled with cotton waste saturated with oil. It was only necessary after that to apply a match to the inflammable material to start an incipient conflagration. Had the house itself not been built of granite, and—save the doors and windows and other trimmings—been practically fireproof, the result would have been disastrous; as it was, however, beyond badly scorching the door, and cracking a few of the stones by reason of the intense heat that was generating, no damage was done.

But the fact had been sufficient to remind Nick Carter and his three assistants that Madge had not threatened idly, and that already she had undertaken to carry out the substance of some of her warning.

At midnight the day following the fire in the areaway a blazing bomb was hurled through the window of the second story of Nick Carter's house, and rolled to the middle of the floor, where it blazed furiously, and would undoubtedly have done a great deal of damage had it not so happened that the housekeeper was present at the time, for Nick had a guest that night, and she had been called late to prepare the room for him.

The day following this one, about four o'clock in the afternoon, Joseph discovered a dynamite cartridge containing a pound and a half of the explosive in the vestibule at the front door. The fuse of this cartridge was already alight and would have reached and exploded the percussion, or detonating cap, if Joseph, for some reason unknown, had not gone to the front door at that moment. He was not called there, and had not heard anybody in the vestibule, or on the steps, and Joseph forever insisted after this incident that it was an intervention of Providence.

This last incident was extremely serious, for had the cartridge been exploded it must have torn away the entire front of the house, and have done enormous damage, even if it had taken no lives.

Friday night of that week at about half-past eight o'clock in the evening Chick and Patsy were walking up Madison Avenue together, and when they arrived at the corner of Thirtieth Street, and were about to turn toward Fifth Avenue, a shot was fired at them from across the street.

Fortunately the bullet did not strike either of them; and, although they both immediately pursued the would-be assassin, he was evidently prepared to avoid them, for he leaped upon a bicycle and sped away so swiftly that there was no hope of overtaking him. They only saw that he was tall and slender, and that was all.

The Saturday morning following an express wagon stopped at Nick Carter's house and delivered a package addressed to the detective, which was marked: "Fragile. This side up, with care."

Joseph carried it to the detective's study, placed it upon the table, and was about to leave the room when Nick stopped him.

"What is that, Joseph?" he asked.

"An express package, sir, which just came for you."

"Who brought it, Joseph?"

"The express wagon, sir."

"Bring it over here. Let me see it."

Joseph took the package in his hand, carried it over to place it on the desk in front of the detective, who regarded it with a smile, while strangely enough his mind went back to the number of attempts to injure him that had been made during the week that was now nearly past.

"Did you sign for it, Joseph?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I am expecting no package." said the detective.

"No, sir," said Joseph, not knowing what else to reply.

"I think, Joseph," said the detective, "that if you will take it to the basement, or, rather, to the laundry, and draw one of the tubs there full of water, it would be a good idea to put the package to soak for five or six hours before we open it."

"Really, sir," said Joseph. "Why?"

"Joseph, if that package had come here as it has a week or ten days ago, I should have opened it without a second thought, but, under the circumstances and considering all that has happened of late, I deem it wise to use every precaution. Take the package down and soak it as I have directed."

Some hours later, when the detective recalled the incident to mind, he and Chick went to the basement together, found the package, and with a great deal of care opened it—from the bottom.

It was found to contain an infernal machine of the most approved pattern, loaded with broken glass, slugs of lead and old iron, and an assortment of nails, old keys, and bullets.

"A very pretty little present to send a fellow," said Nick, smiling grimly. "I rather think it is a lucky thing, Chick, that it occurred to me to give it a good soaking. I wonder what the woman will do next?"

Sunday evening when the detective entered his room he found Joseph writhing on the floor in evident agony, brought about by the contents of what had been a box of candy, and Nick instantly guessed that another attempt had been made upon his life, this time to poison him.

But Joseph fortunately had only nibbled at one of the pieces, and, beyond an hour's suffering for his foolishness, was not injured.

It appeared, when Nick questioned him, that a boy had handed the box of candy in at the door, saying, when Joseph appeared to receive it, that it had been ordered by the detective himself, and was to be placed in his study for him; and the boy had had the temerity to raise the lid of the box when he delivered it, wink slyly at Joseph, and exclaim:

"See! aren't they dandy? I tasted one; they're fine."

And then he had run away, laughing.

Joseph had seen the candy, and, being fond of it, could not resist the temptation also to take a taste of it when he placed the box upon his master's table.

That same night, at half-past eleven o'clock, Nick was seated at the desk in his study, which is located on the third floor in the rear of his house. He was engaged in looking over some notes relative to an old case which he wished to recall to mind.

The shade at the window was lowered, but the light was in such a position that it threw his shadow against the curtain and outlined his head upon it almost perfectly.

Suddenly he was startled by the report of a gun, and the next instant a bullet crashed through the glass of his window and buried itself in the opposite wall of the room.

Later on, when he investigated the incident, he found that the bullet had passed directly through the shadow of his head as it was cast upon the window shade, the person who fired it evidently supposing that his head was directly behind that shadow; but the fact that the light was at one side of the room, and had therefore thrown the shadow somewhat back of where he was actually seated, saved his life.

Further investigation disclosed the fact that the bullet had been fired from the rear of one of the houses in the block directly behind where the detective lived. It was not discovered how the would-be assassin had secured his position on the roof.

But this accumulation of accidents—so called for want of a better term—was altogether too much for the serenity and the composure of the detective and his assistants.

It was evident that Madge had determined to make his life miserable if it could be done, and when Nick recalled the substance of the letter she had sent him he decided in his own mind that the bullet had not really been intended to take his life, but only to warn him of the dangers that were hovering over him every minute that he lived.

In the meantime—or, rather, during the time that has already been mentioned—the detective and his assistants had not been idle. There had not been a day or a night when he and Chick and Patsy and Ten-Ichi had not been engaged in searching some part of the city for Black Madge, or for some trace of her.

They had visited the dens in the lower part of the city; they had questioned the policemen and the stool pigeons of the detective bureau, and they had even gone so far as to communicate directly with crooks who were known to them for information concerning the woman.

But none had been forthcoming. Black Madge was keeping herself as thoroughly under cover as if she were still in the prison in that other State from which she had escaped.

But after this occurrence of Sunday night, when the bullet was shot through the window at the detective, he determined to make no more half-hearted efforts to find Madge, but to set out at once that very night in search of her; and accordingly he put away his papers and called Chick into the room with him.

"Chick," he said, "do you happen to know anything about Mike Grinnel's place?"

"I only know," said Chick, "that he is said to keep one of the worst dives in the city, and that it is located somewhere in Rivington Street. I am not sure about it, because I have never had occasion to go there. The only thing I do know about it is that it is said to be a great Sunday night resort for thieves and crooks of all classes."

"Right," said Nick. "That coincides with what I have heard. I have never been there, either, Chick but I am going there to-night—now. The question is, do you want to go with me?"

"I sure do," replied Chick.

CHAPTER XXI.

CURLY JOHN, THE BANK THIEF.

Mike Grinnel's place in Rivington Street was at that time one of those monstrosities which were permitted to exist within the limits of New York City nobody knows how. During the day and the early part of the evening it was to all appearances merely an ordinary saloon, and if a stranger were passing it he would regard it as a likely place to enter if he required refreshment.

But when the hours deepened into the night, the place gradually assumed more and more the aspect which might be labeled dangerous. Men and women drifted in together and talked in low tones at tables arranged along the side of the room, and as the time continued toward midnight, and passed it, the air of respectability gradually disappeared until it was entirely gone.

By eleven o'clock the place was usually thronged by people who seemed to know each other in a furtive sort of way, and who sometimes would call others by name across the room.

At one o'clock the front doors were closed and locked; the curtains were tightly drawn so that not a ray of light was permitted to escape into the street, blinds were pulled up to make this fact doubly secure, and this was when the place really began to live and thrive in its true character. Then also was when Mike Grinnel himself came out of his shell, and assumed personal charge of the affairs of the place; for Mike Grinnel had a reputation among the crooks and thieves who were his customers,

and if an incipient row started at any time among his guests he had only to look with his frowning brow in their direction to quell it.

The way into this dive of Grinnel's after the legal hours, and when it was supposed to be closed, was, strangely enough, through a house from the other side, and of course it followed that only the initiated—those who were known to the man at the door—could pass.

When Nick Carter and his first assistant left the house that particular Sunday night to go to Mike Grinnel's, the principal question was how they were to get inside the place at all.

Nick had no doubt in his mind whatever that if Black Madge were in town that she would be one who would most certainly visit Mike Grinnel's dive Sunday night, for that was the red-letter night of the week at that place among the inhabitants of the underworld.

He knew that she would feel perfectly secure against intervention there. He knew that she would have perfect confidence in the espionage which Mike Grinnel exercised in his place for the safety of his customers, for it was his boast that no thief or criminal of any sort had ever been arrested in his place and taken from it by the officers.

And, therefore, Nick felt sure that if he could but gain admission and Black Madge were in the city, which he did not doubt, he would find her there.

To enter a place of this kind one must be actually introduced; that is, vouched for by some frequenter of it. It will not suffice for one to apply at such a place, and state merely that he knows so-and-so and is all right; he will be turned down hard. But Nick Carter was never without resource in a matter of this kind, and, therefore, when he left the house with Chick, instead of going directly to Mike Grinnel's they took their way to police headquarters, where, as he knew would be the case, he found the inspector.

"Inspector," he said, "I noticed in the paper yesterday morning that Curly John had been arrested by one of your men and brought to headquarters on suspicion of being connected with that Liverpool bank robbery three months ago."

"That's correct," said the inspector. "Do you know anything about the case?"

"Not a thing in the world," said Nick, laughing; "but I want to use Curly John. I want to use him very badly. I want you to lend him to me for to-night, if you will."

The inspector could only stare his amazement. He had known Nick Carter a good many years, but never before had he received a request of this kind from him.

"I guess you will have to say that again, and say it slow, Nick; I don't think I understand you."

The detective laughed heartily. Then he began at the beginning and told first about the letter he had received from Black Madge containing the threats, and then one by one related the incidents that had happened to him and to his household during the week that was past. In conclusion, he said:

"Now, inspector, I am convinced that if Black Madge is in the city of New York, she is now at this very moment seated at one of the tables at Mike Grinnel's place. I want to go there to find out. If she is there I want to know it. If she is there and I can manage to find out where she goes when she leaves there, that is all I care to know to-night."

"But how can Curly help you?" asked the inspector.

"Curly can help me in this way: I know something about his reputation and his career. I came across him once several years ago in reference to an old case of mine with which he had nothing to do, but concerning

which he gave me some valuable information. I found that Curly John was all right at that time, and, as people of his profession regard it, pretty much on the square. I want you, if you will, to ring the bell and order him brought up here and let me talk to him."

"That's easy," said the inspector, and he did as requested.

Five minutes later when Curly John entered the room he paused when he was just inside of the door, and fixed his eyes intently upon Nick Carter, and then, with scarcely a glance at the inspector, who had summoned him, he addressed himself directly to the detective.

"I know you," he said. "I remember you perfectly well, Mr. Carter, and I wouldn't be afraid to bet that it was you that sent for me right now. I hope you've come to get me out, for I give you my word that I know no more about that Liverpool crib-cracking business than you do, and that's what they're holding me for just now."

"Curly," said Nick, "you gave me some assistance once in a case I had after I assured you that you would not betray a pal in doing it, and that I would do a certain favor for you afterward. Did I keep my word with you?"

"You kept it for fair, Mr. Carter. I ain't forgot it, neither."

"Well, Curly, I have come here to-night to get you to do another favor for me, but first answer me one question."

"All right, sir. What's that?"

"Do they let you in at Mike Grinnel's Sunday night prayer meetings?"

"They sure do, Mr. Carter."

"If you were at liberty at this minute, isn't that the first place you would point for?"

"That's about the size of it."

"And you would have no trouble in getting inside?"

"Not the least in the world."

"If the inspector will consent to let you go will you take me there—me and this young man beside me, who is my assistant—on condition that I make you a solemn promise that I will make no arrest while there; that I will in no way interfere with Grinnel's business, or with any of his customers who are there, and that unless you reveal the fact yourself it will never be known that I was inside the place?"

Curly John scratched his head in perplexity.

"That's a pretty big contract you ask of me, Mr. Carter," he said. "What's the game?"

"The game is, Curly, that I am very anxious to find out if a certain person is in the city. If that person is in the city that person will be at Grinnel's to-night, I know."

Curly scratched his head some more.

"And suppose, Mr. Carter, that person is at Grinnel's to-night, what do you expect to do to that person?"

"To use your own words," replied Nick, "not the least thing in the world."

"Then what do you want to go there for?"

"I have already told you that. I want to find out if that person is in the city."

"Are you giving me this on the square?" asked Curly John.

"Absolutely on the square."

"And you won't make any trouble?"

"Not a particle of trouble of any kind."

"You nor that chap over there who is with you?"

"Neither of us. You have my word for that."

"Well, what about what's to come after it? Do you intend to follow that person down and do the arresting afterward?"

"I will promise you, Curly, that there shall be no arrest of any kind or of any person arising out of the visit to Grinnel's place to-night within twenty-four hours from this moment."

Curly scratched his head a third time very intently and seriously, and at last asked:

"Don't any of them coves over there know you, Mr. Carter?"

"I suppose," said Nick, smiling, "that every one of them knows me, and that many of them know Chick as well."

"And so that's Chick, is it? I have heard about him. Well, now, Mr. Carter, let me ask you this:

You just now said that unless I told it, not a soul would know that you were there at that place to-night if I took you there. Now, how do you reconcile that with the fact that they all know you?"

"In this way, Curly: That I shall ask you to wait here a few moments after you give your consent, while Chick and I step into the next room and make some alteration in our appearances with things that the inspector will loan me from his cabinet."

Curly sneered.

"Oh! this is a disguise business, is it? Well, Mr. Carter, do you think that the guns down there at Grinnel's are such blamed fools as not to see through a racket of that kind?"

"Oh! I can fool them, all right," said Nick, "if you consent. Now, Curly, I have given you a promise once before in my life, and lived up to it literally. I have made you one now, and I will live up to it literally. The inspector will let you go and will send for you in case he should want you again. You get your liberty, and I get what I want. And now, Curly, it's up to you. Will you do it?"

"Yes, by thunder, I'll do it! Go into the next room and get ready. When you're ready, I am. And I will introduce you and Chick there as a pair of old pals of mine from the other side of the water."

CHAPTER XXII.

AT MIKE GRINNEL'S DIVE.

When Curly John knocked at the door of the Sunday-night entrance to Mike Grinnel's dive in a peculiar manner, that was evidently full of significance to the one behind it, it opened instantly, and the burly form of the bouncer of the establishment was discovered.

His face, which might have been a stone mask for all the expression it manifested when he first appeared, beamed with joy, however, when he discovered Curly John, and thrust out his big hamlike fist with undoubted enthusiasm.

"Hello, Curly," he said. "I thought you were in limbo."

"And so I was," replied Curly, "until they discovered that they didn't want me."

"Make up their minds that you wasn't in that little affair, eh?"

"That's the size of it, Red. Here's my two friends that I brought with me. Some one you don't know, and they ain't either of them known inside, either. Do you let them pass?"

"Sure, Curly. I lets them pass, if you say so."

"Come, lads," said Curly, without vouchsafing any further statement to the guard at the door; and so it was that the way was open for the two detectives to enter upon the mysteries of that infamous retreat where it was the proprietor's boast that no police officer had ever appeared without his own expressed permission.

The big room where the patrons congregated on Sunday night was comfortably filled when Nick Carter entered it with his two companions.

In all that place there were only two tables unoccupied, and one of those was almost directly in the centre of the room. Curly led the way to it at once, and the three seated themselves around it while the bank burglar sent out his order for the refreshments that were required.

Nick and Chick had made the necessary changes in their appearance; and each assumed the outward character and general aspect of a person who would be likely to frequent such a place as Grinnel's.

Nick Carter was always a thorough believer in the maxim that too much disguise was worse than none at all, and therefore, when the occasion required that he should assume one, it was his habit to do as little real disguising as possible, and therefore, with the exception of giving himself a black eye, and blocking out a couple of his teeth, fixing his face so that it appeared as though there was a couple days' growth of beard upon it, and donning a rough-looking costume, he was unchanged.

In a place like Mike Grinnel's no man thought of taking off his hat unless his head was too warm, and therefore Nick kept his on with the brim pulled down well over his eyes.

The mere fact that the two detectives were in the company of Curly John was sufficient voucher for their personalities, and it did not occur to anybody, not even to Mike Grinnel himself, to question them.

They were there; they were with Curly John; he had brought them, and that was enough. And, although there were many expressions of welcome spoken and called out to Curly John when he passed into the room and took his seat at the table, nobody in all that throng offered to approach him, for it was an unwritten law of the underworld that a man who reappears for the first time among his associates after imprisonment is left alone to make his own advances when he is pleased to do so.

As for the two strangers who accompanied him, their presence did not concern the others, so long as Curly John vouched for them.

If they thought anything about it at all, they assumed that the burglar was preparing for another professional trip, and that the two strangers were interested in his plans. They all regarded it as none of their affair, and in the underworld it is the rule of life to mind your own business, and let other people do the same.

As soon as the detective had taken his seat—which he was careful to do in such a position that he could command a view of the greater part of the room without perceptibly turning his head—he began, little by little, and one by one, to study the people who were there.

At first he paid no attention whatever to the men; but, since it was a fact that more than half of the guests, or patrons, or whatever you please to call them, were women, and as there were at least sixty persons present, it was some time before his eyes rested upon the face that he sought.

But Madge was there without question. She had not thought it necessary to attempt any disguise of any sort, and her bold, black eyes were roving restlessly about the room when Nick Carter encountered them.

But his own were so thoroughly shaded by the wide brim of the slouch hat he wore that he did not believe that she knew he was looking at her.

In this manner he studied her for some time, and discovered that she was furtively watching Curly John and the two who had come there with him.

It was apparent to the detective that Black Madge had not overcome her old habit of suspecting everybody; and the mere fact that there were two strangers present in the room, even though they were accompanied by one of the old habitués of the place, was to her a warning that they might not be all right.

It had been Nick's intention to make no demonstration of any kind while he was inside Grinnel's dive; it was his purpose to go there and observe all that he could, and then to go away again without having exchanged a

word with any one except Curly, unless it should become absolutely necessary.

He intended—if he should succeed in finding Madge there—to trust to luck and his own ingenuity to follow her when she would leave the place, and so discover where she was living, and by that means he could keep his eye upon her for several days thereafter, and ultimately could round up the gang of crooks which he had no doubt she had organized.

But Madge, although she had no idea that either of the strangers might be Nick Carter, did not intend that these two men should leave that room without passing through some sort of inspection which would serve to identify them for what they might be.

While every one else in that place was thoroughly satisfied about them, because of their presence with Curly, this fact cut no ice with Black Madge, and always suspicious, she was instantly suspicious of them when they entered.

Therefore, a very short time had elapsed after the detectives took their seats at the table, before she left her own place, and crossed the sawdust-covered floor swiftly to Curly's table.

There she slapped him on the shoulder, as a man might have done, and with a laugh, which called the attention of every other person in the room to what she was doing, as she intended it to do, she exclaimed:

"Hello, Curly. It does me good to see you back among us again. How did you put out the lamps of those chaps up in Mulberry Street, so that they let you out?"

Curly, who was wise in his day and generation, jumped to his feet and shook hands heartily with Black Madge; for he guessed instantly that it was not to greet him that she had crossed the floor, but rather to gain a closer view of his companions, and by standing erect he could keep her a little distance without appearing to do so.

"Oh! they just found out they didn't want me," he replied. And then, realizing that something was expected of him by the others in the room, at least, if not Madge herself, he jerked a chair around toward her, and added: "Sit down, Madge, won't you, and have something?"

"Sure," she replied, laughing again, and dropping negligently into the chair.

"What kind of a game are you playing now, Madge?" asked Curly, after he had motioned to the waiter to approach; and then, pausing long enough to give the order, he added: "Last I heard of you you were behind the mosquito bars resting up a bit."

Madge laughed again. She seemed to be full of laughter to-night, but it was an uneasy, imperfect, and significant sort of laughter that Nick Carter had heard from her lips before, and which he, therefore, understood. He realized, now, that it was important that he should proceed with great caution.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Nick Carter did that for me. But I'm out again, just the same, and now my lay is to get square with Nick Carter."

"You don't say so," said Curly, shifting uneasily in his chair, and forgetting himself so far as to cast one furtive glance in the direction of the detective. "What are you going to do to him?"

"Ask me that after I've got him where I want him," replied Madge, fixing her bold eyes full upon Nick Carter's face; and then, slowly removing them, and swinging her body half around until she again faced Curly, she added insinuatingly:

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends, Curly?"

Curly shook his shoulders. He was on safe ground, now, ground where he felt perfectly at home; for it was never necessary to indulge in

introductions in that walk of life, not even when they were asked for, but he replied:

"Sure, Madge. These are my two friends, and I guess that'll be about enough. You can call them by any name you want to, and they'll both answer you."

"Under cover?" she asked.

"A little," admitted Curly.

"Are they dumb, or tongue-tied, or have they temporarily lost their voices; or, are they only bashful? I should think that two full-grown men such as they are might be able to speak for themselves."

"It ain't always good taste to speak for yourself," said Curly, with an uneasy laugh. "They might do it once too often."

Madge's suspicions were plainly aroused. She remained silent for a moment after that, and then, leaning forward, she rested her arms upon the table, and with her face thrust well forward over them, again stared into the detective's face.

"Do you know who you are like?" she asked coolly.

"Yes," replied Nick, just as coolly as she had spoken, "I have heard it said often, but if you will take my advice you won't mention the name aloud. It might excite some of the people here."

She laughed.

"That's just what I mean to do," she said, with a tightening of her lips. "They need excitement; that's what they live on. It's what we all live on. It's what we come here to get. Excitement is the backbone and muscle and sinew of our beings. And do you know that I think I could startle them all mightily right now if I should call something out to them which is on my mind to say?"

She reached out her left hand, and seized Curly by the shoulder, pulling him over to her, and then, in a tone which only the three who were present with her could hear, she went on, her voice deadly calm:

"Did you think, Nick Carter, that you could fool Black Madge? Did you think that you could come here into this same room where I am without my knowing instantly who you were? Don't you know that your very presence in the same room with me would make itself known to my sensibilities by reason of the very hate I bear you?"

She paused a moment and laughed uneasily. And then she continued:

"Don't you know, Nick Carter, that you have walked directly into a trap, from which you cannot escape? And were you not aware before you came here that if your identity became known your life wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase? If you so much as quiver an eyelid, Nick Carter, I will call out your name, and point you out as a spy, and you know what that will mean in Mike Grinnel's dive."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BLACK MADGE'S DEFIANCE.

It was a crucial moment for each of the three men who were seated at that table, and it affected each of the three quite differently.

Chick was concerned only for the safety of his chief, for even then it did not occur to him that Black Madge had taken sufficient interest in himself to identify him, and that doubtless she still regarded him as really a friend of Curly's.

Curly was plainly frightened, as well as utterly astounded. It had never occurred to him that the disguise of Nick Carter, which had seemed to him to be perfect, would be, or could be, so readily penetrated; and he realized, for the moment, at least, that he was in as much danger as Nick Carter himself, for if it should be known to the others—or should suddenly be made known to them—that Nick Carter was in that room, they would not only kill the detective, but they would also murder the man who had dared to bring him there.

Black Madge was as thoroughly aware of this fact as was Curly himself, and she did the latter justice to believe that somehow he had been imposed upon by the detective, just as Nick had sought to impose upon all of them; in a word, she did not blame Curly for the existing situation.

As for the situation itself, she was delighted with it, for it had thrust Nick Carter into her power much more quickly and certainly than she had ever supposed it could be done.

She had not been seated at the table with them a full minute before she was perfectly assured in her own mind that the man opposite her was Nick Carter, and it did not occur to her to doubt that the other man was one of his assistants—it made no difference to her which one.

And now, while she threatened the detective with death if he should make any overt omission, she was eagerly casting about in her mind how to get him entirely into her power to do with as she would without alarming the others that were present there.

She knew that Nick Carter understood and realized the danger as thoroughly as she did; but she also knew that he was extremely resourceful whenever danger threatened, and that she might only count upon him as captured and overcome entirely when he was bound and gagged, or dead, before her.

As for Nick, when Madge uttered the threat to him, he returned her gaze steadfastly, at the same time reaching out a little farther with the hand that was resting upon the table, and then he replied, quietly and in the same low tone that she had employed:

"I took every one of those things into consideration, Madge, when I came here. Now, I want to know if you intend to shout out that name, and give the alarm, as you have threatened to do, or if you will sit there quietly where you are, pretending to be interested in the drink in front of you, and talk it over calmly."

She shrugged her shoulders, and again leaned back in her chair, but at the same time drawing it a little nearer to the table.

"As you please," she said. "I don't care to precipitate matters and break up the party here unless you force me to do so—at least, not just yet."

"Madge," said Nick, "you think that you have me in your power. You believe that by shouting out my name I would be killed. That is doubtless quite true, but before that killing was accomplished I should have done a little execution on my own account, and Chick, who is here beside me, is quite ready to do his part. As for Curly, he is an innocent party in this affair, so we won't consider him at all, although you must admit that he would have to take the consequences of bringing me here, which would be far from pleasant."

She nodded, and smiled at him fiercely, and then she replied:

"Go on. You were about to tell me that in the sleeve of that arm, which is extended toward me over the table, you hold a weapon with which you

could kill me before I could give the alarm a second time. Very well I know it, but all the same I am not afraid of it, Nick Carter, any more than I am afraid of you, and you know that I have never been that."

"I know," said Nick.

"Go on, then," she repeated. "What do you want to talk about? Since you wish to talk things over calmly, what did, you come here for, anyhow?"

"I came," said Nick, "believing that you were in the city, and knowing that I would find you here if you were, I came because I was determined to find out where you were, and to put a stop to your career."

She started savagely, but Nick held up his hand and hushed her.

"I am not going to make any arrests in this place, Madge. I am not going to interfere with Mike Grinnel's business, or with his reputation for affording security to his patrons. If every person in this room was my friend instead of my enemy, you, Madge, would be as free to depart in peace when you get ready to do so as you would have been had I not come here."

"That all sounds very fine," she said, "if only I cared to believe it."

"Believe it or not, as you please, it is the truth."

"And what did you come here for?"

"I have told you that already. I came to find you."

"And, having found me, to let me go away in peace?"

"I have said that also, I believe."

"Nick Carter," she exclaimed, laughing scornfully, "you are not a good liar."

"I never lie," replied Nick.

"Well," she said, "I will speak my little piece, now that you are through. You are here, and there are two locked doors between you and the street, and there are between twenty and thirty men in this room now who would rather be killed than let you escape if they knew you were here. I might as well confess to you that eight of those men belong to me. That is, they obey my orders. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"I think," replied Nick quietly, and smiling back at her, "that, with your permission, I will order another round of drinks."

She pushed back her chair petulantly from the table, and half started to rise from it, but Nick Carter's voice, low, but sharp, halted her.

"Stop, Madge," he said; "keep your seat. This thing has gone too far for either of us to attempt to fool the other. You might as well understand that if there is to be any row precipitated, I will do the precipitating."

She blazed her eyes at him for an instant, and then parted her lips with the evident intention of shouting out his identity. And, while he did not move to prevent her from doing so, the steady gaze of his eyes somehow overcame her, and she closed them again without making a sound.

"That is better, Madge," he said. "This is a case of diamond cut diamond, only for the moment my diamond is a little harder and sharper than your own. Take my advice, and sit where you are."

Curly and Chick had both been absorbed spectators and listeners to this little scene between the detective and Black Madge.

Chick had, of course, made himself ready at any instant to act, no matter what sort of action might be required.

But Curly was distinctly in a quandary. He knew that it was no fault of Nick's that the discovery had been made, and he also knew that if she was forced to keep silent the identity of Nick Carter would not be discovered by the others present.

If the thing should come to a row, every instinct of Curly's life and profession would force him to take the side of the underworld as against Nick Carter, and his impulse would be that way, too. But his strongest desire at that moment was to prevent an exposure at any cost. It was for this reason that he now intervened.

"Madge," he said, "listen to me for a minute."

"Hello, Curly," she said, turning her head lazily toward him, "it isn't necessary for you to butt in on this affair."

"I am going to butt in, Madge, just the same. Now, listen to me."

"Go on, then."

"You know where I stand, Madge, and there ain't no reason why I should explain how all this came about; or, if you think there is, there ain't going to be any explanation offered anyhow, but the point about it is this: It wouldn't be healthy for you, nor for any of us, if you should yell out a certain name in this present community, and I want to tell you right now that I won't stand for your doing it. It's up to you to keep still, Madge, and mind your own business, for while I should be with the boys as against Nick Carter to the bitter end, if it actually came to a fight, at the same time I'd blame you for the fight, and although you're a woman you would be the first one I'd look for out of this bunch. Now, I've spoken my piece, and you can go on with yours."

This was a development which Madge had not anticipated, but Curly had spoken so plainly to the point, and his premises were so well taken and so logical from his standpoint, that she could offer no objection.

If she could have left the table for a moment; if she could have had time to think, or if she could have secured an opportunity to exchange half a dozen sentences with any one of the members of her Band of Hatred, it would have been different, and she might have planned for the overthrow of the detective.

As it was, the circumstances had arrived at such a condition that leaving her chair would be equivalent—so far as her companions were concerned—to the calling out of Nick Carter's name.

Madge knew Curly John, and she knew him for a man who never made idle threats. His reputation among his fellows was that he spoke very rarely, and said very little when he did speak, but that what he said was always to the point, and that he always meant what he uttered.

And so she saw the tables rather turned upon herself. Instead of Nick Carter being in her power, she was temporarily in his.

The situation had its ludicrous side. Each was in a sense the prisoner of the other, for, while Nick Carter could not hope to escape from that room unless she gave him permission to leave it, she could not rise from the chair upon which she was seated without risking death unless he permitted it.

If only she could have conveyed the shortest kind of a message to Mike Grinnel, or have signaled some word to Slippery, or to Surly Bob, or Gentleman Jim, or Fly Cummings, or Cuthbert, or Maxwell, or The Parson, all of whom were in that room at the time, everything would have been so easy for her.

But she could not leave her chair; neither could she signal to any of these.

Nick Carter's eye was upon her; his arm was extended across the table, and she knew the potency of that arm, as well as something about the strength and fund of resource of the detective.

But the situation was unbearable. She felt that she could not endure it, and that in some manner it would have to be brought to a close, and at once.

And so she leaned still further back in her chair, gradually tilting it until it rested poised upon the two rear legs.

And then, with a sudden motion, and at the same instant uttering a scream, which rang shrilly through the room, she threw herself directly backward, at the same time kicking up her feet and so striking them fiercely against the under side of the table.

The weight of her body and the force with which she struck the table instantly overturned it, bottles, glasses, and all, so that it crashed to the floor in utter confusion.

And at the same instant every one in that room leaped to their feet and reached for their weapons.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FLIGHT THROUGH THE CELLAR.

The action of Black Madge was so sudden and so unlooked for that it came as an entire surprise, even to Nick Carter, and the act which overturned the table, coming as it did from a position

directly opposite his own, sent the table full upon him, and spilled the contents that had rested upon it into his lap.

More than that, in spite of his effort to resist the force of the attack, his chair was overturned backward, and he found himself the next instant sprawling upon the floor.

But even if he was for an instant put out of business by the incident, there were other things connected with it which worked to his assistance.

Always in a resort of this kind, where there is ever the least likelihood of police interference, there are many arrangements prepared for instantly turning off the lights, and it is the first impulse of every person who finds himself in such a place to "dowse the glim" instantly upon the raising of a disturbance, if it is possible to do so.

Again, when there is the sudden noise of crashing glass and the appearance of confusion in such a place at such a time, it never can be determined at once what the cause of it is, and, as discretion is always the better part of valor, and certainly is counted so among the denizens of the underworld, there were at least a dozen men in that room at the time who leaped for the switch to turn off the lights the instant that Madge upset the table.

Mike Grinnel himself happened to be standing where one of the switches was within reach of his hand, and so it happened that before Nick Carter's chair could reach the floor the place was in total darkness.

Nick was not unaccustomed to experiences of this kind. It was by no means the first time that he had been present in a resort like this one when the lights had been turned off, and it is safe to say that he never in his life entered a room where such a thing was likely to occur without studying his surroundings carefully the moment he was inside, and determining then and there what course he would pursue if such an event should occur.

Consequently, although Madge's action came as an utter surprise to him, he was nevertheless prepared for it. And so was Chick.

When the detective found himself falling, and knew that his chair must topple over, the thought instantly came to him that Chick would escape the greater part of the confusion resulting from it—and he knew that he could rely upon Chick's activity and resource as thoroughly as upon his own.

Nick managed to seize the edge of the table with his hands while falling, and exerting the great strength of his arms to the utmost, he literally picked it from the floor and hurled it over his head, while he was practically lying on his back.

Then, kicking the chair from under him, and half rolling over—realizing in that instant that Madge could not possibly get upon her own feet as quickly as he could on his—he leaped to his knees, and threw himself forward across the now empty space which the table had occupied, and so managed to seize the skirt of Black Madge's dress.

One jerk of his strong arms pulled her toward him, and the next instant he had seized her, and by passing one arm around her neck clapped his hand over her mouth, thus preventing her from calling out.

Although she struggled fiercely, clawing with her hands, and kicking with her heels, and attempting vainly to scream, the confusion in the room was so great that no one was conscious of what she was doing, save Nick Carter himself, who held her.

And Nick knew that behind the bar, almost midway in its length, there was a small door, which connected with some sort of an apartment back of it. What that apartment was, he did not know, other than that he had seen Grinnel pass out and return through that small door twice since he entered the place; and he concluded that it must be sort of a retiring room, possibly a private office of the proprietor.

The door was not tall enough for a man to pass through standing in an upright position, and it was considerably narrower than an ordinary door; but all the same, to Nick's idea, it offered a safe and secure retreat for the moment, if he could but succeed in reaching it.

What was beyond it, he did not know. But it was enough for him, that, if he could get past it before the lights were turned on again, he at least would be out of that crowded room, and have time to catch his breath, and determine what it was best to do.

He regarded Chick as entirely competent to take care of himself.

Therefore, the instant that he seized upon Madge, and stopped her screaming by clapping his hand over her mouth, he pulled himself to his feet, and, holding her struggling form firmly, he carried her safely across the space which intervened between him and the end of the bar—a space which he knew would be practically clear of impedimenta at the moment.

Nick figured that Grinnel, having turned off the lights, would stand silently with his hand upon the switch ready to turn them on again in an instant.

If he could only succeed in carrying Madge behind that bar and through the door already described be fore the lights were turned on, much would be accomplished.

The detective reached the end of the bar in safety, and, feeling the back of it with his body, glided around behind it to the spot where he knew the small door to be located, and then, releasing his left hand from the woman he carried long enough to reach for the latch of the door, he pulled it open, passed through, and closed it behind him.

With the hand that was still free he pulled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and, before Madge could escape him, he snapped them upon her wrists behind her back and dropped her to the floor, at the same time

pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and tying it firmly—much too firmly for her comfort—around her jaws.

His next act was to produce his flash light and turn it upon the door, where, to his delight, he discovered that it was only necessary to drop a heavy iron bar into place to secure it; and this bar passed entirely across the door, and rested in iron slots at either side of it.

He also noticed in that instant that the door was an extremely heavy one, and that the partition through which it opened was a substantial one. Without doubt, the room had been prepared by Mike Grinnel himself with great care as the means of a safe and sure retreat for him in the event of a raid upon his place.

The detective discovered, also, that there was a gas jet in the room, and he turned this on, and lit the gas at once.

Madge was in the meantime using every effort in her power to pull the handkerchief from her face, so that she could cry for help, but now with light sufficient to see what he was about, the detective lost no time in securing her so firmly that she was entirely helpless.

To her baleful glances of utter hatred, he paid not the slightest attention, but he began at once to examine the room with great care, knowing well that there should be another means of entrance to and egress from it than the one he made use of. For Mike Grinnel, skilled as he was in the habits of the people he dealt with, would never have built for himself a den from which there was no escape after once he had entered it. Although there was no sign of a second door to be seen anywhere, Nick did not despair of finding one, and he began his search by first pulling out a sideboard which stood against the wall, and looking behind it.

He next had recourse to a couch, under which he searched for a trapdoor, but found none; and then his attention was attracted to an iron safe, not quite so high as his head, which stood in one corner of the room.

An iron safe is not a thing which is easily moved from its position, but Nick seized upon it, nevertheless; nor was he surprised when he found that it was so perfectly balanced on the wheels that supported it that it moved readily enough in response to his efforts.

And behind it was the door he sought. It was not over three feet high, and thirty inches in width, but there was a latch upon it, mortised into the wood, and there was a hole in the door, through which was passed a small steel chain that was attached to a rung fastened to the iron safe. This, of course, was intended to use for pulling the safe back into position after the door had been made use of, and the fugitive, whoever he might be, had made his escape.

Nick pulled open the door, thus making it ready for his use, and then quickly returned to Black Madge's side. He raised her in his arms, carried her to the little door, and, having unceremoniously thrust her headfirst through it, crawled after her, closed the door, and pulled the safe into place again with the aid of the chain.

He found himself now in a narrow corridor, faced by rough bricks on either side of him, evidently constructed between the party walls of the two buildings, and ten feet in front of him he perceived a flight of steps leading downward.

Again picking Madge up in his arms, he hurried down the narrow stairs to the bottom, and there came upon an iron door, fastened with a spring lock on the inside, which he therefore easily opened.

Passing through this, and closing it behind him, so that the lock snapped again, he found himself in the cellar beneath the building that adjoined the one in which Mike Grinnel's dive was located. Across the cellar, and at the far end of it, was a flight of wooden stairs.

Nick regretted at that moment that he did not remember what sort of a place was located next to Grinnel's, but he realized the imperative necessity of getting out of the building into the street as quickly as

possible, no matter how he accomplished it, and therefore, when he carried his captive up those stairs to the top of them, and found there only an ordinary wooden door locked against him, he lost no time in kicking it open, and passing through.

When he did so, and when he came out in the room above, it happened that the battery of his own light gave out, and before he could determine his surroundings he was in utter darkness.

This lasted, however, only a moment, and he was in the act of hastening forward toward the front of the house, when, with startling suddenness, the whole place flashed into brilliant illumination, and he found himself standing at one end of what looked like a Chinese laundry, while directly in front of him, and not many feet distant, was Mike Grinnel and three of the men from his place, confronting him, with drawn revolvers in their hands.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MAN IN THE BED.

The detective knew in that instant that he could no longer hope to save his prisoner; that is, to escape with her, and that the chances were about a thousand to one against his own escape.

That Mike Grinnel was thoroughly incensed, and that he was determined that the detective should never get out of that place alive, was apparent in the cold glitter of his eyes, as he looked at Nick across the barrel of his revolver.

And Nick knew how Grinnel had succeeded in heading him off. He could see in his mind just what the surprise was in the saloon when the lights were again turned on and it was discovered that one of the strangers who had come there with Curly had disappeared, and had taken Black Madge with him.

Grinnel, knew, of course, that there was only one way out of that place, which was through the private door back of the bar into the little room which he used as an office, and thence through that other door behind the safe, through the narrow corridor, down the stairs into the cellar, and then up again into the back end of the Chinese laundry.

And Grinnel had lost no time in summoning to his aid three of his most trusted adherents, and hastening with them to the laundry, where he was ready to head off the detective's retreat.

It had not been difficult for them to get there and be ready for him before he could reach the place with his burden; for he had used up a great deal of time in searching out the secret door behind the safe, and in finding his way through the cellar.

And, moreover, Mike Grinnel was a man of expedient. Having arranged this method of escape for himself, if the necessity of it should arise, he had also prepared the laundry with lights to turn on or to extinguish as he might desire; and, therefore, having reached the laundry and prepared

himself and his followers for the coming of the detective, they had only to wait silently in the darkness until they heard him approaching, when Mike switched on the lights.

It was a moment fraught with peril, and with unnumbered possibilities. At such times there is always an instant of inaction; an instant when neither party concerned knows quite what to do.

But the detective, as it happened—with the possible exception of Mike Grinnel himself—was the first to recover.

The detective was carrying Madge in his arms; and now, at the risk of injuring her, realizing that it was the only way by which any possibility of escape could be offered to himself, he raised her over his head at the very instant that the turning on of the lights revealed his enemies, and threw her with all his strength at Mike Grinnel's burly figure.

Of course, not one of the crooks dared to use his weapon, lest Black Madge herself be shot, and it was upon this idea that the detective acted as much as any other.

Nor did it occur to Mike Grinnel that this other, whom he had seemed to have now guessed must be Nick Carter, would resort to any such measure as he had, and, therefore, he was not prepared.

The body of Madge, flying the short distance across the room, struck Grinnel squarely on the chest, and thus forced him backward against two of the men who were with him; and so in that instant four people all together were huddled in a heap upon the floor, and only one of Nick's visible enemies remained standing.

And the instant that Nick threw Madge at them, he leaped forward and seized the switch, which was almost at Grinnel's shoulder, where he had been standing; and, with a twist of his wrist, he turned off the lights as suddenly as they had been turned on.

At the same instant he had taken into consideration the position of the one man of the enemy who was left erect, and no sooner had he turned the switch than he leaped forward toward the spot where he knew that man to be standing.

Nicely calculating the distance, he struck out a savage blow with his right hand, and he heard this last one of his enemies go down in a heap upon the floor.

And then the detective leaped over him toward the door which he had seen during that brief interval of illumination, passed through it, and pushed it shut behind him.

He knew now that he was in the front room of the laundry. He knew that there should be tables and benches there, and it was only the work of an instant for him to reach out and feel around until he seized upon one, and then, exerting his great strength, he pulled it over in front of and against the door he had closed.

A faint light shone into that room from the street, and Nick instantly leaped for the front door of the shop, reaching it only to find that it had been locked when the others entered.

But the door was of glass, and, hesitating not an instant, he seized a chair and hurled it into the street, thus making a hole through which he had no difficulty in passing.

The next instant he was outside, and for the moment, at least, safe. But the detective knew that he was by no means free from pursuit as yet, although he had no intention of fleeing very far; and, as he was about to turn away, he remembered that he had left Chick inside the saloon surrounded by rascals of every kind.

It was not in the nature of Nick Carter to desert any one under such circumstances, much less his favorite, Chick.

While he hesitated, he heard a noise behind him in the laundry that was made by Grinnel and his three followers, attempting to escape from the predicament into which he had thrown them.

He remembered then that Grinnel and his men must have come out of the dive by the front door or by the hall-door entrance, in order to have reached the laundry when they did, and he figured in that instant that it was more than likely that in doing so they had not thought to fasten the door behind them, or had purposely, perhaps, left it unlocked in order that they might be able to return with all the more speed to the safety and seclusion of the dive.

He heard them pounding against the door against which he had pulled the heavy bench, and he knew that at least three or four minutes must elapse before they could make their escape; and in that moment he decided to return to the saloon at whatever cost, if it were possible for him to get there.

A few quick bounds brought him to the front door of the dive—that door which swung so ceaselessly to and fro during the legal hours of its business. He knew, although he tried it softly, that it was securely locked against him, and he passed on to the hall door of the house, which was just beyond it. This, as he had guessed might be the case, was not fastened, and he pushed it open and passed beyond it.

He found himself in a hallway in black darkness, and while he paused for a moment to listen, not a sound of any kind came to his ears, a fact which led him to determine that either Chick had already been done for by the frequenters of the dive, or else that he had been made a prisoner, and was lying somewhere, bound and gagged, awaiting the return of Grinnel.

Nick now crept along the hall until his hand came in contact with a balustrade; and here he paused, uncertain whether to proceed through the hall to the rear of the building, which he knew should give an entrance to

the saloon, or to ascend the stairs and temporarily hide himself in the neighborhood of the house. Everything considered, this latter course was distinctly the best one, since, doubtless, it would never occur to Mike Grinnel or to any of those who were concerned with him in this incident, that Nick Carter would have the temerity to return to the same house from which he had just escaped.

Therefore, if safety were the only incentive for Nick Carter, to act upon this was the very best course he could have adopted. But Nick was ever one who considered his own safety last. His whole impulse now was to do the best that could be done to get Chick out of the predicament into which he had been thrust; and he considered that to be the very method he had adopted.

Nick knew the characteristics of the people against whom he was pitted well enough to understand that the moment they realized that he had escaped them they would simply return to the saloon of the dive to discuss it—and doubtless, also, to call to severe account those who were responsible for the affair.

Such a discussion would not take place until two things had happened—until they were satisfied utterly that Nick Carter had escaped them, and also that they had Chick so thoroughly in their power that he could not hope to escape.

And so the detective ascended the stairs softly, and as silently as a shadow. He had no means of knowing, of course, the character of the rooms on those floors, or their location; but, nevertheless, the circumstances were such that he had to take desperate chances, and therefore when he reached the landing he felt with his hands silently along the wall until he came to a door, which he felt slowly down until he touched the knob. This he turned, trying to open the door which resisted him, showing that it was locked.

There is a way to force a door—that is, an ordinary door—and at the same time make very little noise. It is done—if the door opens inward—by seizing the knob firmly with both hands, having turned it, and then by bracing the body with one knee pressed firmly against the door directly under the knob. In this position, if it is assumed by a strong man, every effort may be centred upon one sudden impulse forward, which, while there is no visible or perceptible impact, will place all of the muscular force and weight of the man directly upon the point where the latch or lock of the door is located; and it is a very substantial lock which will not give way under this sort of pressure when it is correctly applied. Nor is there any perceptible noise, more than that of the tearing out of the slot which holds the bolt of the lock.

When this door gave way before the detective it admitted him to a square room at the rear of the house—a room in which a lamp, turned low, was burning; and as he closed the door behind him and pulled a chair in front of it to hold it shut, he saw a figure of a man, who had been sleeping fully clothed on a bed in one corner of the room, start to an upright posture, staring and apparently alarmed.

"Who——" the man started to exclaim, but the detective interrupted him with a sharp command.

"Shut up," he ordered, "if you let out a peep you will be the worse for it."

Without a word, the man sank back upon the pillow, apparently not in the least alarmed now, and evidently believing that the person who had entered his room was only another like himself, who, having gotten into some sort of trouble, was fleeing from his pursuers; and by all precedents, if the man was pursued to that room, it would be infinitely better for its permanent occupant to appear to be still sleeping soundly, than to have any of the aspect of a confederate, and so he closed his eyes again as if he were still alone.

Nick waited a moment at the door, listening for sounds outside, and while he stood there he heard the hall door from the street open, and presently close again, and he could distinguish the tramping of feet along the hall as several persons passed to the rear of the house, evidently on their way to the saloon again.

As soon as these noises had ceased, he knew that he was for the moment at least safe from pursuit. He piled other things against the door, and then deliberately crossed the room to the lamp and turned it up, after which he strode over to the bedside.

"Now, my friend," he said to its occupant, "I'll have to ask you to wake up for about three minutes."

"All right," was the simple response. "What do you want? Who are you, anyway? And what in blazes do you mean by bursting into my room in this way?"

"First," said Nick, "I want to know who you are, and whether you belong here or not?"

"Oh, you make me tired," grunted the man on the bed. "I'm Phil, the head day bartender downstairs."

"All right, Phil," said Nick, smiling. "Get up on your feet, where I can look at you, and where you can answer a few questions for me."

"Oh, what's eating you?" growled the bartender. "I ain't been to bed more than an hour. Let me sleep."

Instead of replying, the detective reached out his hand, and, seizing Phil by the shoulder, jerked him from the bed to the floor, stood him on his feet, and then seated him forcibly upon one of the wooden chairs near at hand—so forcibly that his jaws snapped together like the cracking of a nut.

"Now, will you be good?" asked Nick, smiling grimly.

"Yes, curse you," was the surly reply. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Well, talk on, can't you? I'm listening. Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you who I am," answered the detective, "and after I have done so, perhaps you will consent to listen to me. I am Nick Carter, the detective, and I want to make a little bit of use of you right now, Philip."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CRIMINAL'S COMPACT.

"How long have you been here in this room?" asked the detective sharply.

"I told you about a minute ago," was the surly reply. "About an hour."

"Where were you before you came here?"

"That's none of your infernal business."

"I want to know if you were downstairs in the saloon?"

"No, I wasn't, if that will satisfy you."

"Have you been there at all to-night?"

"Yes, I was there about three hours ago."

"Was Black Madge there when you were there?"

A cunning leer came into the fellow's face before he answered, and then he replied by asking another question.

"Who's Black Madge?" he demanded.

"You know well enough who Black Madge is," insisted the detective; "and, Phil, if you keep a civil tongue in your head and answer my questions as I ask them, it will be all the better for you. If you do not ——"

"Well, what then?"

"If you do not, there are several little things connected with your career which will make it unpleasant to have the inspector up at headquarters question you about."

"Well, I ain't a-goin' to give away anybody downstairs, no matter what happens," said the bartender.

"I'm not asking you to give anybody away. I merely asked you to answer my questions."

"Well, go ahead and ask them. I will answer them if I can."

"Was Black Madge in the saloon downstairs when you were there?"

"Yes. She was."

"Has she been in the habit of coming here frequently of late?"

"I can't tell you for certain about that. You know, I'm on duty in the daytime, and people of her kind come only at night."

"Answer my question," said the detective sternly. "You know the answer to it, and you understand that I know you do."

"Well, I guess she's been in most every night for the last week."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"No."

"Do you know any of the gang that is traveling with her?"

"Yes; I guess I know most of that bunch."

"Well, Phil, I want you to tell me their names;

every one of them. That is, every one that you are certain forms one of her gang."

"There ain't anything certain about it, Carter. I'll tell you that on the level. All I know about her and her gang is guesswork. But if I was asked to mention them I should say that, judging from appearance, there is about eight of them. Besides, Madge has got something up her sleeve, but what it is I haven't an idea. It looks to me, though, as if they were getting ready to crack some pretty big crib, and make the haul of their

lives. Now, if you're on to that lay, and your only purpose is to prevent them doing it, so that I ain't telling you anything that will go for putting them behind the bars, I will be on the level and tell you all I know."

"You will have to tell me, anyhow, Phil," returned Nick quietly. "If you don't do it willingly, I know of more than one way to compel you to do it. However, you may rest easy upon the point you have made. I am not at the present moment seeking to put any of them behind the bars; only Black Madge herself. She has got to go there, whether you talk to me or not."

"Well," said the bartender, "she don't cut any ice with me, anyhow. She's too stuck up for my kind."

"All right," said Nick; "tell me the names of those eight men."

"There's Slippery Al, Surly Bob, Gentleman Jim, Fly Cummings, Joe Cuthbert, Eugene Maxwell, and The Parson. Oh, and there's Scar-faced Johnny; I forgot him. Now, I'll leave it to you, Carter, if that ain't a likely bunch."

"And they were all in the room downstairs to-night," murmured the detective meditatively.

"What!" exclaimed the bartender in astonishment, "do you mean to say that you have been inside that saloon to-night?"

"Certainly."

"Would you mind telling me how you got there?"

"Never mind all that, Phil. That is not what I am here for—to explain things to you. Do you know where Black Madge lives, or where she can be found besides in this saloon?"

"I don't know anything about her more than I've told you."

The detective looked around the room for a moment, and discovered that one of its articles of furniture was a tall, old-fashioned pier glass, which reflected the full length of a person who stood before it. Then he turned around and commanded the bartender to stand on his feet, studied his appearance carefully, and then he shook his head.

"It won't do," he muttered.

"What won't do?" asked Phil.

"I was considering the possibility of making myself up in your likeness, and of venturing in that disguise to go to the saloon," replied the detective.

"What! right now?" asked Phil.

"Yes."

"And you don't think you could do it, eh?"

"No, Phil. You're too tall and too big. I never could make myself up to look like you in the world. I will have to think of some other way."

Phil was thoughtful for a moment, while the detective was absorbed in his own study of the situation, and then he looked up suddenly and exclaimed:

"Why don't you send me downstairs for you?"

"Because," replied Nick, "the moment you got there you would call up the whole gang, and have them up here after me inside of a minute."

"I wouldn't, either, Carter. Not if I agreed not to."

"I can't trust you, Phil."

Again that cunning leer came into the dissipated face of the bartender, and he said quickly:

"You can trust me, if you pay me enough for it."

"A bribed man is usually the first to betray," said Nick.

"Not if the bribe is big enough, Carter."

"Do you mean to say that I can trust you to go down into the saloon and to come back here presently and tell me exactly what the situation is?"

"You can, if you pay me enough. I told you that before."

"It isn't the question of pay, Phil; that is, the amount of pay. I would be willing to give you almost anything if I thought you would perform exactly what I want done, and return to me with the information I desire, without saying or doing anything to betray my presence here."

"Well, I'm your huckleberry, if you want me to do it. All you've got to do on your part is to cough up the dough."

The detective, who always went well supplied with funds, took a roll of bills from his pocket, and slowly counted out one hundred dollars, which, without a word, he handed to the bartender.

"I am going to take you at your word, Phil," he said slowly, "and that is the first installment only of what I shall give you if you perform the service well and thoroughly, and do exactly as I instruct you to do, no more, and no less."

"And if I do it all as you tell me to do, how much more do I get?"

"Listen, and I will tell you."

"I'm listening, you bet your life."

"I came here to-night, Phil, with my first assistant, Chick; he is downstairs somewhere now, probably bound and gagged and thrown under a table, or behind the bar, or locked up in a closet. I want you to go down there, and find out exactly what has become of Chick, and what

has happened to him. I want you to pick up all the information you can about what has happened there to-night—that is, what they are saying about it. You will have to remain there perhaps half an hour to accomplish this, and all of that time you must be extremely careful not to let it appear that you know anything about me at all."

"Well, and after that, what am I to do?"

"When you know what has become of Chick, and where he is now, figure out the best way in which we can set him at liberty at once, or, if you can manage to do it before you return to me, do it. If you succeed in setting him at liberty yourself within the next half hour, I will, before the sun goes down to-morrow, give you nine hundred dollars more, and that will be a pretty good nest egg for you, Phil."

"I'll do the job, you needn't fret."

"Wait, there is another thing."

"Well, sir?"

"If you find that you cannot liberate him yourself without assistance, you are to return to me at once, and we will plan together how it can best be accomplished. When we have done that, if through your aid I succeed in getting Chick safely away from here, you shall have the nine hundred plunks extra just the same."

"On the level, Carter?"

"Yes, on the level, Phil. I mean every word I say."

"Well, I'm the huckleberry that can do it."

"Wait, Phil, before you start, there is one more thing still."

"What! another?"

"Yes. This. After we have gotten safely out of this pickle, and the place has quieted down, it will be up to you to find out for me where Black Madge hangs up her clothes. It is important, Phil, that I should get that woman back into the prison where she belongs."

"I ain't no stool pigeon," grumbled the bartender.

"Neither am I asking you to be a stool pigeon," said the detective. "What I want you to do is simple enough. I am not laying any plans against any of the regular frequenters of this place. It's only Black Madge I want, and you have confessed already that you don't like her. Now, it's up to you if you want to go through this whole job, and do it right. And, Phil, if you will stick to me and see the whole game through the way I have outlined it to you, another thousand goes with the first one."

"Geewhiz! do you mean that?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, then, I'm game for the whole layout, and I will see it through to the end, but I don't want you to forget, Carter, that, if anything ever comes of it so that my part in this business is found out by any one of that crowd down there now, male or female, I wouldn't give a snap for my chances of being alive twenty-four hours afterward."

"They won't find it out through me," said the detective. "If they find it out at all it will be through you. And there's one thing more you must remember, Phil, and that is if you betray me you will be in a whole lot worse fix than you would be if your friends downstairs discover your treachery. For if you do betray me, I will never let up on you, Phil, until I see you behind the bars for a term of years that will make you an old man before you come out again."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GLARE OF A MATCH.

When the bartender had taken his departure, Nick found a cigar in one of his pockets, and seated himself to smoke quietly until Phil should return. But when more than half an hour later the cigar was consumed, and he had thrown it aside, he began to feel a sense of uneasiness that the man should be gone so long a time.

However, he realized that it was no easy task that Phil had undertaken, and that he might well occupy an hour or more in accomplishing it.

He had no more cigars to smoke, but he seated himself resolutely in a chair, determined to wait with patience until his messenger should return.

There was a small clock, ticking away merrily on the mantel, at the far end of the room, and the detective watched it while the minute hand worked its way slowly around the dial, until an hour, then an hour and a quarter, and, finally, an hour and twenty minutes had elapsed since the departure of the bartender.

His impatience was now so great, and his natural distrust of the confederate he had employed was so prominent in his mind that he left his chair, having first extinguished the light, and, going to the door, opened it softly and peered outside.

The hallway was in utter darkness, the same as when he was there last, and, although he listened intently, he could not hear the suggestion of a sound from the lower regions of the house. After waiting a few moments

longer, he tiptoed forward cautiously to the stairs, and descended them, being careful to step as closely as possible to the spindles of the balustrade, in order that they might not creak beneath his weight, and thus alarm others in the house. In this way he gained the lower floor.

Nick was somewhat handicapped without his flash light, but he remembered quite distinctly the location of the sound he had heard two hours earlier, when the party from the laundry had followed him in, and passed through the hallway to a rear door. Now he sought that door by following carefully along the wall until he came to it.

But, although he searched diligently for many minutes, he could not find so much as a suggestion of a door anywhere.

He remembered then that in all probability there was no perceptible door at all; that the door which was there somewhere was concealed in the wainscoting in some way, or otherwise hidden from casual observation. To have maintained a door of entrance to the saloon from that hallway would have rendered it entirely unnecessary for Grinnel to keep up his private entrance to the saloon from the other street. Nick's only method of finding it now was to light a match, and this he hesitated to do, not knowing what warning its glare might convey to others.

But there was no alternative, and presently he began his search by lighting matches one after another, permitting them to flare up sufficiently for a moment's vision, and then throwing them quickly to the floor, after the manner adopted by burglars when they were engaged in robbing a house before the pocket flash light was invented.

He was not long in discovering the entrance he sought. The walls along the hallway were not plastered; they were merely built up with matched boards, which had stood there unpainted for so long a time that they had achieved a veneer of filth and dirt which made them look, in the flare of the match, like mahogany.

But he could easily see where there was a keyhole cut into one of these boards, and, although around it there was no other evidence of a door, he knew that if he could turn the tumblers in that lock it would be revealed to him.

He went to work with his picklock, and, as he supposed, the instant the bolt of the lock was shot back the door opened easily and noiselessly in his grasp, and from beyond it he could at once hear the murmur

of distant voices; also very far ahead of him, and beneath what was evidently another door, he could perceive a gleam of light.

He stepped through, and closed it after him, but, realizing that it was more than likely that he might wish to leave in a hurry, he left it unlocked.

And now he tiptoed forward to the door beneath which the light shone, and, getting upon his hands and knees, held his ear down where he could hear with more distinctness.

The effect was almost the same as if he were inside the saloon. Strangely enough, also, it was Madge's voice that came to him first, for it appeared that she was seated near that very door, and by the answers that were returned to her, Nick knew that no less a person than Mike Grinnel himself was her companion. And they were speaking in low tones, but, nevertheless, every word they uttered could be heard distinctly by the detective.

It was in the midst of their conversation, evidently, that Nick began to listen, and Madge was saying:

"I swore then, Mike, that I would be even with him, and that if I ever succeeded in getting out of that prison where he put me I would never rest another minute until Nick Carter was placed beyond the power of injuring anybody."

"You bit off a little more than you could chew,

didn't you, Madge?" asked Mike Grinnel, in his slow, even voice, in which he never permitted a sign of emotion.

"No, I didn't," she retorted. "I made some mistakes, maybe. I shouldn't, for instance, have written him the letter I did."

"What was the letter, Madge?"

"Like a fool I wrote him a threatening letter, in which I told him to look out for me. That was my vanity, I suppose. I wanted him to know that I was on his track. I wanted to worry him; to give him something to think of, and a lot of things to look out for."

"Well, what then, Madge?"

"It was then, Mike, that I began to get the guns together, Slippery Al, and Gentleman Jim, and the others, and, of course, I made this place our headquarters."

"That, Madge, is just what you shouldn't have done. That's what I'm finding fault with you about now.

"Well," she said, "it's done, and it can't be helped; and Nick Carter has been here, and he's gotten away again; but, all the same, we've got Chick in our power, and if I do to him as I feel like doing now, he will regret the day that he ever took my trail."

"If you leave him where he is now, Madge, he'll do that," said Grinnel, laughing softly.

"Why, what would happen to him there?" she demanded quickly.

"For one thing the rats would probably eat him up before very long, and it wouldn't be the first meal of that kind they've had down there, either."

"You didn't tell me where you put him," said Madge.

"I don't tell anybody exactly where that place is, Madge. It's a little hole that I've dug out underneath the cellar of this house; if it was anywhere in the old country it would be called a dungeon; as it is, I call it the grave —people who go there have a habit of never coming out again."

The detective was anxious to know what had become of Phil, the bartender. It was evident that the man had done nothing to betray the detective, since these two were talking so quietly just inside the door where Nick was listening.

The next words, while they did not exactly reassure him, made him think that, after all, the bartender might be carrying out his contract by attempting to set Chick at liberty himself.

"Is that where you sent Phil a few moments ago?" she asked. "Down there to the dungeon where you put Chick?"

The detective could hear Grinnel chuckle and then reply:

"Yes, Madge, I sent him down there to fasten the young fellow up, so that there would be no chance of his getting loose. You see, he was senseless when we chucked him in there, and I forgot to make him fast, as a sailor would say, but there are staples in the wall down there, and there are chains fastened to those staples, and there are nice little steel bracelets at the end of those chains, that fit beautifully around a man's ankles. I sent Phil down to lock them fast."

"I thought nobody knew where that place was except yourself," said Madge quickly.

"Oh, Phil's all right. I have to have some confidence in my men here, or I couldn't run the place."

"All the same," the detective heard her murmur, "I'd rather you had left Chick to me. They're a slippery lot, those detectives, and I shall be uneasy— —"

The detective heard no more of what was said, for at that instant he was greatly startled by hearing a sound behind him, and evidently beneath him, the consequence being that he paid no further attention to the conversation beyond the door.

Indeed, he drew back away from it, and softly rose to his feet, in order that he might be thoroughly prepared for anything that should happen; and while he stood there he was conscious of a cold, damp draught of air blown into his face—air that smelled as if it might come from the cellar—and he was somehow conscious that a trapdoor had been lifted, while the next moment he was aware that somebody was climbing through it into that narrow hallway—somebody who was not more than ten or twelve feet away from him. How he had wished for his little flash light then.

Once he imagined that he could hear a faint whisper, and a sharp, warning hiss for silence immediately following it.

Then it came back to him suddenly, all that he had heard Mike Grinnel say to Madge about the dungeon in the house, and the bartender's errand to it.

He thought then that the people who had raised themselves through the trap—and he was sure that there were two of them—must be Phil and Chick, the latter having been liberated by the former; and, acting upon the impulse of the moment, he struck a match and held it into the faces of the two men. The glare of the match shone directly into the face of Chick.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BLACK MADGE CAUGHT IN A TRAP.

But the flaring up of the match also developed another rather startling fact, and that was the presence of Curly, who, with the bartender, Phil, was standing directly behind Chick.

The light also discovered Nick Carter to the others, as it discovered them to him, and, although it burned but a moment, it was a revelation to all the parties concerned. It was Phil, the bartender, who acted more quickly than the others in this somewhat confusing moment of the encounter, for, with admirable presence of mind, he stepped quickly forward, and, reaching out his hands, managed to pull the others toward him until their heads were so close together that the faintest whisper could be heard, and then he said:

"Follow me along the corridor into the front hall. We can talk there."

They did so, and presently they stood together in the front hallway beside the stairs beyond the hidden doorway which Nick had discovered. And, during the time they occupied in getting to this point, Nick, who realized that the disguise he wore was no longer of any importance, busily engaged himself in removing it, or, at least, the facial part of it, so that, although in the dark they could not see him, he had restored himself, nevertheless, this proper person.

"Now, Curly," said the detective, "tell me what this all means. I don't understand it at all."

"Let me talk," interrupted Phil. "It's this way, Carter: When you escaped from the barroom through the little door into the boss' sanctum, you had no sooner gone than Grinnel switched on the lights again, and your

absence was discovered. Then it was that the whole bunch lit on to Curly and Chick here, with both feet, downed them, trussed them up, and when Chick was taken to the cellar below, to feed the rats, if he had been left there long enough, Curly was fired along with him. I tell you, right now, Carter, it's all up with Curly in this place. He never can make himself good with this bunch again as long as he lives, and it's up to him to light out now, for good and all, unless he wants to turn up his toes and go to the morgue."

The detective turned to Curly again, and once more struck a match so that they could all see the faces of one another.

"Is that straight, Curly?" he asked.

"That's about the size of it, Mr. Carter."

"Then," said Nick, "am I to understand that the occurrences of this evening have released me from my promise to you to make no arrests in this place, or any arrest of any one who is now in this place within twenty-four hours?"

"Yes, sir, the promise is all off. You can do as you've a mind to. It would suit me to a T if you would gather in the whole push."

"Thank you, Curly," said Nick. "That statement of yours lets me out of a peck of trouble, for having given the promise, of course I would not break it, and I could not quite see how we could carry this thing through to a finish without."

He was silent for a moment after that, and then he asked:

"Can I rely upon you, Curly, to stand by me through what is to come?"

"To the last ditch, Mr. Carter," was the emphatic response.

"And you, Phil—what about you?"

"Well," was the slow reply, for the man was evidently considering his words with very great care, "I guess my usefulness in this place is just about over. When the boss finds out that Curly and Chick have both gotten out of the dungeon below, he will know mighty well who it was that let them out, and that will mean yours truly for the dead wagon in about fifteen minutes; so I think, Carter, that I'd better tie up to you while I've got the chance. I am not a crook myself, and never have been one, although I have consorted with them, and been companions with them for a good many years."

"And will you see the thing through to the finish, Phil?" asked Nick again.

"I will do just as Curly said he would do. I'll stand by you to the last ditch."

"Are you all ready to obey my orders, exactly as I shall give them?" asked Nick again, slowly.

"We are," came the unanimous response.

"In this case," said the detective, "I am going to make a desperate effort to find out what a bold stroke will do, and here is my plan: We will go back together to that door before which I was standing a moment ago, which, I conclude, from its character, is rather a flimsy——"

"It is that," said Phil.

"And after we get there we will stand silently for a moment, each one of you preparing for the signal which I shall give. When I say, 'Now,' I will throw myself against the door, and burst it open, and as I do so, and leap into the room, you three are to follow me, one after the other, as quickly as possible.

"You, Phil, will make directly for the electric switch, and you will see to it, no matter what happens, that the room is not plunged in darkness.

"You, Curly—by the way, have you any weapons about you?"

"I have got two guns in my pocket, all right."

"Very well; you, Curly, the moment you get into the room, will draw your two guns, and level them at the crowd.

"After that all you have to do is to follow the lead of Chick and myself, and protect yourselves until the fight is over—if there is a fight."

"I reckon I can do that, too, Mr. Carter," said Curly.

"I haven't a doubt of it, Curly. I want you to remember not to shoot too quick, and under no circumstances to shoot to kill, unless it is absolutely necessary; as a matter of fact, I don't expect that we will have much trouble, for when they see us in the room, fully armed, and hear the first words that I shall utter, I think we will have no difficulty in carrying our point."

There was nothing more said then, and Nick turned away, and led them quickly back again to the door, near which he had heard the conversation between Black Madge and Mike Grinnel.

For a moment they stood there, waiting to get their breath, and to prepare their muscles and sinews and nerves for the ordeal to which they were about to be put; and then from the detective came a low and emphatic—"Now!"

The instant that the detective shouted out this word, he plunged forward, throwing his shoulder heavily against the flimsy door, already mentioned, so that it was burst from its lock and from its hinges at the same time, and was sent flying halfway across the room.

But even before the clatter which followed the crash had subsided, Nick Carter, with a pistol in either hand, had leaped across the threshold, and with one more bound arrived at the spot directly beside Mike Grinnel.

Turning the weapon about while he approached, he brought the butt of it down, with a resounding whack, upon Grinnel's skull, sending him tumbling to the floor, and then he straightened up, with both arms extended, and the muzzles of his pistols wavering from form to form of the astonished throng in the room, and he cried out:

"Hands up, every one of you. I am here after just one person. The rest of you I don't want, unless somebody interferes with me, and if you do interfere there are enough outside of this house, without doubt, to take you all in."

When he leaped across the threshold, the others followed him, as he had directed, and, having already cautioned Chick in a whisper to look out for Madge, and feeling sure that the others would do their respective duties, as he had directed, Nick had no fear whatever of the result.

A collection of criminals assembled as these were are always glad to hear that there is only one among them who is "wanted," for each one seems instinctively to know that he is not "it." And Nick Carter knew the criminal class so well that he was certain that this announcement would prevent any immediate attack upon him by the twenty or thirty men who were gathered there.

Having heard this statement, and having, also, taken due notice of his suggestion that there were plenty of reënforcements outside the building, although it will be remembered that the detective had not explained how far outside they were, and remembering that a considerable time had elapsed since Nick Carter left that room before, they were one and all willing to wait a moment before beginning what might be an unnecessary attack, which would be sure to send many of them to prison before it was over. And so they waited, casting furtive glances at one another, many of them with their hands upon their weapons, and all of them ready to fight, if need be, but quite as ready to avoid a fight, if it were policy to do so.

"Now, listen to me," said Nick Carter. "I came here to-night to get Black Madge, and I know by the sounds I have heard behind me since I entered the room just now that she has got a pair of bracelets on her that she doesn't like to wear. I am going to take her away with me, and she is going to be sent back to the prison from which she escaped, and if there is anybody in this crowd that interferes with me, or offers to do so, it will be very much the worse for that person.

"On the other hand, if I am not interfered with, we shall go away quietly with Madge, and what the rest of you may do after that does not concern me. You have my word for it, and you all know that when Nick Carter gives his word, he keeps it. Now, answer me, somebody, and let him speak for all. Does what I say go?"

A voice from the far end of the room replied instantly:

"I say it goes, for one."

"Then answer, all of you," said the detective.

"It goes. You bet it goes."

In their eagerness to answer his request, they came near to all shouting at once.

"Thank you," said Nick, smiling. "Now, I have one more word to say, and then we will take our departure. There are eight men here whose names I will call, and I want them each to take this as a warning from me. They are Scar-faced Johnny; a man called Slippery Al; Surly Bob, whose career I know; Gentleman Jim, who, for the good of his health, ought to take a vacation on the other side of the ocean; Joe Cuthbert; Eugene Maxwell; Fly Cummings; and, last, but not least, is the man who is known as The Parson, and that same Parson had better get himself out of New York as quickly as possible.

"I am speaking now to those eight whose names I have mentioned. I know that you have all joined in with an organization created by Black Madge. I know, or think I know, the purpose of that organization. I will give all of you twenty-four hours to get out of the city of New York, and if any one of you is found inside of the limits of the city after that time, look out for squalls."

There was a low murmur around the room following upon this speech by the detective, but whether in protest or approbation, the detective did not concern himself to discover.

With calm deliberation, he turned his back upon them all, and motioned to Chick, who had Madge securely handcuffed to his own wrist, to precede him through the door.

Then he motioned to Curly and to Phil to pass through it also.

And, then, stepping himself to the door, he turned about upon the threshold, and faced the crowd once more.

"One last word to you all," he said. "He among you who hurts Curly John, or Phil, the bartender, for this night's work, or attempts to do so, hurts me. I bid you good night."

It is only necessary to add that, within forty-eight hours of that time, Black Madge found herself again in the prison of that State for which she had expressed such abounding contempt, and that, at her trial, which followed soon after, she was sentenced to serve ten years in the State prison, where she is at this day.

THE END

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